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FOOTBALL PREVIEW 2020

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PHOTOGRAPH BY
ERICK W. RASCO

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"What Is a Quarterback?"

Hint: It's This Guy

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LAMAR JACKSON

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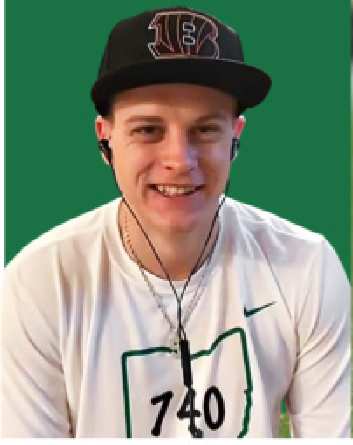
ROLE REVERSAL
LSU butted in to take Alabama's traditional place against Clemson in the title game last year. This season, expect the Tide to once again rise.

SIMON BRUTY

5 MINUTE GUIDE

What a difference a season makes. At this time a year ago **JOE BURROW** was practically a nobody in NFL circles—now he's a franchise savior in Cincinnati and leads the league's class of impact rookies. Who's taking that leap in 2020? Put North Dakota State QB **TREY LANCE** at the top of the list. Find him at No. 6 (and climbing) on our look at the top prospects for the 2021 draft—the start of everything you need to know for the upcoming NFL and college seasons



10 IMPACT 2020 NFL ROOKIES

JOE BURROW QB, CIN
CHASE YOUNG DE, WAS
JEFF OKUDAH CB, DET
JEDRICK WILLS OT, CLE
PATRICK QUEEN LB, BAL

ISAIAH SIMMONS LB, ARI
ANDREW THOMAS OT, NYG
C.J. HENDERSON CB, JAC
BRANDON AIYUK WR, SF
TUA TAGOVAILOA QB, MIA

2021
DRAFT TOP 10

1 TREVOR LAWRENCE
Clemson
quarterback

2 PENEI SEWELL
Oregon
offensive tackle

3 JUSTIN FIELDS
Ohio State
quarterback

4 MICAH PARSONS
Penn State
linebacker

5 SHAUN WADE
Ohio State
cornerback

6 TREY LANCE
North Dakota St.
quarterback

7 GREG ROUSSEAU
Miami
defensive end

8 DYLAN MOSES
Alabama
linebacker

9 JA'MARR CHASE
LSU
wide receiver

10 PATRICK SURTAIN II
Alabama
cornerback

JUSTIN TAFOYA/NCAA PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES (LANCE); GETTY IMAGES (BURROW); KEVIN D. LILES (LAWRENCE, CHASE); JORDON KELLY/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (SEWELL); MATTHEW EMMONS/USA TODAY SPORTS (FIELDS); RANDY LITZINGER/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (PARSONS); MARK J. REBILAS/USA TODAY SPORTS (WADE); SAM WASSON/GETTY IMAGES (LANCE DRAFT); STEVE MITCHELL/USA TODAY SPORTS (ROUSSEAU) MICKEY WELSH/USA TODAY SPORTS (MOSES); MICHAEL WADE/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (SURTAIN)

GEORGE WALKER IV/THE TENNESSEAN/USA TODAY SPORTS

5-MINUTE GUIDE

NFL 20
CFB 20

HOLDING CALL?

The pandemic could throw the **SEASON INTO CHAOS**, but if you think NFL owners will leave money on the table . . .

by **GARY GRAMLING**

▶ **WHEN IT COMES** to the 2020 NFL schedule, Chiefs at Buccaneers on Thanksgiving weekend is definitely must-see. So is that Cowboys-vs.-Ravens tilt in Week 13. But the one matchup that will define the season? Definitely COVID-19 vs. human race.

When the league released its full slate of games in May, the assumption was that the number of coronavirus infections would wane over the summer, creating a relatively safe opening for the start of the season. Instead, the number of new daily cases in the U.S. remained dishearteningly high into August, putting the league in a bind. Delaying the start of the season is an option; there are contingency plans that would allow them to postpone the Super Bowl (scheduled for Feb. 7, but could be played as late as Feb. 28). But with the worst of the pandemic threatening to come during fall flu season, pushing the start of the season puts the league closer to losing games outright.

If the full season is played without fans in attendance, team execs have claimed they'll lose $3.2 billion. (Perhaps the equivalent of Liberia's gross domestic product is an exaggeration, but, yes, they will lose a lot of money.) If, after giving up early-season wiggle room, an autumn COVID-19 wave comes and games are canceled, that means even more lost revenue for the league and its broadcast partners. There's also the financial interests of the players; while safety concerns are very real, the majority of them desperately want to play.

Most of the country will spend September grappling with how children will learn, families will eat and hospitals will cope when flu season meets pandemic. So when Bocephus asks America, *Are you ready for some football?*, the answer is probably not, but they're gonna play anyway. ☐

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HEISMAN RACE

It's been 23 years since the Heisman winner wasn't a QB or RB. With that in mind, here are the smart bets for the 2020 award—and five players who could surprise

THE FAVORITES	THE (WORTHY) LONG SHOTS
TREVOR LAWRENCE CLEMSON QB	**JA'MARR CHASE** LSU WR
JUSTIN FIELDS OHIO STATE QB	**MICAH PARSONS** PENN STATE LB
CHUBA HUBBARD OKLAHOMA STATE RB	**SAM HOWELL** NORTH CAROLINA QB
NAJEE HARRIS ALABAMA RB	**JAYLEN WADDLE** ALABAMA WR
SAM EHLINGER TEXAS QB	**BRADY WHITE** MEMPHIS QB

2020 NFL AWARD PREDICTIONS

MVP

PATRICK MAHOMES
QB, CHIEFS

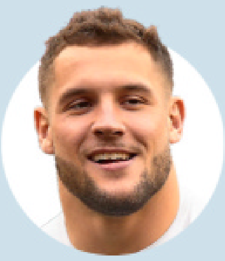
3 MORE CONTENDERS

Lamar Jackson
QB, BAL

Carson Wentz
QB, PHI

Russell Wilson
QB, SEA

DEF PLAYER OF THE YEAR



NICK BOSA
DE, 49ERS

3 MORE CONTENDERS

Aaron Donald
DL, LAR

T.J. Watt
OLB, PIT

Chris Jones
DL, KC

OFF ROOKIE OF THE YEAR

JOE BURROW
QB, BENGALS

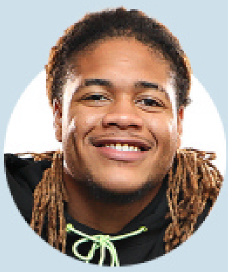
3 MORE CONTENDERS

Cam Akers
RB, LAR

Clyde Edwards-Helaire
RB, KC

Ke'Shawn Vaughn
RB, TB

DEF ROOKIE OF THE YEAR



CHASE YOUNG
DE, WASHINGTON

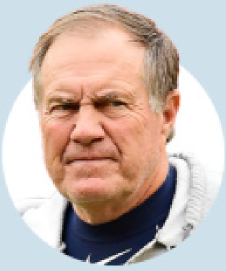
3 MORE CONTENDERS

Patrick Queen
LB, BAL

Jeff Okudah
CB, DET

Isaiah Simmons
LB, ARI

COACH OF THE YEAR



BILL BELICHICK
PATRIOTS

3 MORE CONTENDERS

Kyle Shanahan
SF

Frank Reich
IND

Sean McVay
LAR

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MORE OF THE SAME

As teams scramble to prepare during a shortened offseason, the Buffalo Bills have an ***EDGE ON THE COMPETITION***

► **THERE'S A FAMILIAR** sight in the Bills' locker room this summer: each other.

After COVID-19 sparked an offseason of limited workouts and maximum chaos, continuity has never been more important in the NFL than right now. And the team that leads the league in that category is Buffalo.

According to ESPN, they return personnel that accounted for 88.0% of their snaps last season, highest in the league. Sean McDermott and both coordinators also return after a 10-win season.

The Bills defense's biggest loss was tackle Jordan Phillips, and they immediately replaced him with the underrated Quinton Jefferson, a free agent from Seattle. The best players on that unit might not have popped yet. Second-year tackle Ed Oliver (age 22) and third-year linebacker Tremaine Edmunds (22) are poised to take the next step in front of what is already one of the NFL's best secondaries.

But, of course, Buffalo will go as far as quarterback Josh Allen takes them, and that's why its season could hinge on one of its few new faces. Allen's combination of athleticism, size and arm talent is comparable to a young Cam Newton's, but his scattershot accuracy has held back the offense. Enter Stefon Diggs, acquired from Minnesota for a cache of draft picks, as the true No. 1 receiver Allen has lacked going back to his days at Wyoming. Diggs's ability to separate and track the ball downfield as well as any receiver in football will create the kind of throwing windows Allen has rarely enjoyed, and that could lead to a more confident and accurate thrower. Or, the season could be marred by another familiar site: a drive stalling because of an overthrown receiver. —G.G.

HI, I'M MEL . . .

Without spring practice or a proper get-to-know-ya period, new coaches will have it even harder this year

by
MARK BECHTEL

► **IN THE BEST** of circumstances, being a coach at a new school is hard, what with having to acquaint yourself with 100 new players and get them indoctrinated in a new system—not to mention learning best schmoozing practices when it comes to boosters. (*Pretend that's not a rug? Got it.*)

Few newbies have had it rougher than Michigan State's Mel Tucker, who was hired on Feb. 12 after Mark Dantonio retired, less than a month before the pandemic exploded. Then in July, just before the Spartans were to enter their 20-hour workout week, the whole program was forced to quarantine for 14 days when two staffers and a student-athlete tested positive. When Tucker was hired, he expressed a desire to "hit the ground running." Sadly, he hasn't even hit the ground yet. ▫

SAM NAVARRO/USA TODAY SPORTS (BILLS); G FIUME/MARYLAND TERRAPINS/GETTY IMAGES (TUCKER)

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QBS' BEST FRIENDS

YAC—***YARDS AFTER CATCH***—are fueling NFL passing games more than ever. Just look at the reigning NFC champs

▶ **IT'S NOT OFTEN** that a man as handsome and wealthy as Jimmy Garoppolo gets mocked, but that was the case last January after the quarterback had a mere eight pass attempts in the 49ers' NFC title game victory. That's not even the half of it.

Over the past decade, defenses have gotten faster but smaller to deal with pass-happy offenses; nine of the top-10 seasons for leaguewide yards after catch have come in the past decade. And last year, no quarterback benefited from YAC more than Garoppolo, whose receivers averaged a league-high 6.6 YAC.

In Garoppolo's defense, precise ball placement on short throws helps lead to those yards after catch. And, more importantly, Kyle Shanahan's offense works, especially because he's provided Garoppolo with weapons who thrive with the ball in their hands. George Kittle *(above)* led all receivers and tight ends last season with 626 yards after catch. Deebo Samuel averaged 8.4 YAC per catch, second-best among receivers and tight ends. The rich got richer on draft night, when San Francisco traded up with its second first-round pick to get wideout Brandon Aiyuk, who averaged 10.9 YAC for Arizona State last year.

Due to limited summer workouts and no preseason, tackling will be a challenge in 2020. Especially for anyone lining up against the 49ers. —G.G. ☐

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Edited by **DAN FALKENHEIM**

SCORECARD

FACES IN THE CROWD

GATORADE SPRING NATIONAL PLAYERS OF THE YEAR

JARED KELLEY
▸ Baseball
▸ Refugio, Texas

Jared, a recently graduated pitcher from Refugio High, finished his career with a 32–3 record, 0.43 ERA and 23 no-hit appearances. The 6' 3", 225-pound righthander verbally committed to Texas and was selected by the White Sox with the 47th pick of the 2020 MLB draft.

JAYDA COLEMAN
▸ Softball
▸ The Colony, Texas

Jayda, a shortstop and pitcher for The Colony High, batted .702 for her career and scored the fifth-most runs (261) in high school history. She also went 12–0 with a 0.89 ERA as a senior, her first year as a starter. An Oklahoma commit, she hit .435 to help Team USA win the '19 U-19 World Cup.

JONY MUÑOZ
▸ Soccer
▸ Olathe, Kans.

Jony, a recently graduated forward, had 36 goals and 19 assists in 2019, leading Olathe West High to its first Class 6A state title. A former member of the U-16 U.S. national team, he was named MVP of the High School All-American Game last December, and will play for Liberty.

EMILY MASON
▸ Soccer
▸ Flemington, N.J.

Emily, a rising senior defender, guided Hunterdon Central Regional High to a 21-1-1 record and the Group 4 state championship. She scored as many goals (nine) as the Red Devils defense allowed. Emily started for the U.S. team that won the '20 CONCACAF U-20 title.

TAYLOR EWERT
▸ Track and Field
▸ Beavercreek, Ohio

Taylor, a recent graduate of Beavercreek High, won the Division 1 state indoor championships in the 1,600 meters (4:52.02) and the 3,200 (10:34.79). She captured nine state titles and holds seven U-20 national race-walk records. Taylor will now attend Arkansas.

COURTESY OF GATORADE (5); KIRBY LEE/USA TODAY SPORTS (UPDATE)

UPDATE

▾ ▾ ▾ ▾

Double Take

WHEN HE appeared in the May 2020 edition of FACES IN THE CROWD, Nico Young of Newbury Park (Calif.) High had broken the national three-mile record (13:39.7), won the Nike Cross Nationals with a course-record time (14:52.3) and been named the Gatorade Boys National Cross Country Athlete of the Year. Then, in his only indoor track event of the spring season, Nico set a national record in the 3,000 meters (7:56.97); in June, he ran the 5,000 outdoors in 13:50.55, recording the fourth-fastest high school time ever. Gatorade named him the Boys National Track and Field Athlete of the Year, making Nico only the second dual winner in the same school year. (The other was long distance runner Katelyn Tuohy in 2018.) Nico will compete for Northern Arizona. —D.F.

The MMQB

QB, Redefined

It took **LAMAR JACKSON** less than two years to go from divisive “dual threat” draft prospect to unanimous league MVP. As he looks toward an encore performance, he’s working to ensure that young quarterbacks like him are put in a position to do the same

by JENNY VRENTAS | photographs by ERICK W. RASCO

LOOK TO THE FUTURE

Jackson's development as a passer, including a league-high 36 TDs, led to an MVP year.

“WHAT IS A QUARTERBACK?”

This question was asked on the second Wednesday in January in the Ravens’ locker room, a few stalls down from a Christmas tree that was still standing, evidently in the name of superstition as no one wanted to jinx the team’s 12-game winning streak. All around the building, and all through the city of Baltimore, was a new world of Lamar Jackson’s creation.

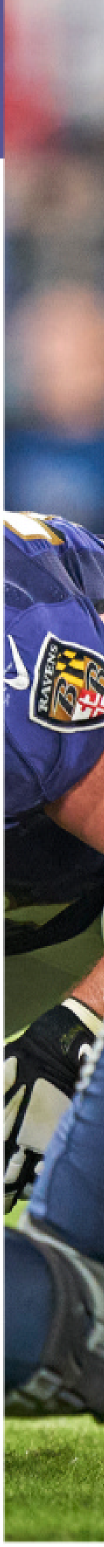
Later that week coach John Harbaugh had shown up at a press conference wearing a hoodie from Jackson’s Era 8 apparel line, emblazoned—like many of its items—with an African wild dog. A doughnut chain sold pastries printed with the “Big Truss” team motto based on a Jackson catchphrase, loosely defined as mutual trust (and since changed to “Big Truzz,” to avoid a trademark dispute). And on the eve of the No. 1 seed’s opening playoff game, Jackson and two teammates surprised the neighborhood of West Baltimore when they arrived at Miss Carter’s Kitchen, picking up a to-go order of seafood pasta, mac and cheese, collard greens and the restaurant’s famous banana pudding.

Then, that Saturday night, the Ravens’ season ended. Jackson stood at a podium after a 28–12 loss to the Titans, sweat on his brow, still wearing his uniform pants, everything about the conclusion of his MVP season feeling abrupt. Hours later, the skies opened up, rain cascading over Baltimore.

Much has changed in the seven months since: Patrick Mahomes and the second-seeded Chiefs represented the conference in the Super Bowl, and won. Then the COVID-19 pandemic arrived, disrupting offseason plans and enveloping the NFL with concerns about fulfilling its schedule. But whenever games resume, the expectations for Jackson will pick up right from where they left off in January.

And the 23-year-old will continue to provide new answers to the question thoughtfully posed then by veteran cornerback Brandon Carr—“What is a quarterback?”—that will be central to the league and to all levels of football, now and for years to come. What Carr and the rest of the country saw last season was the emergence of a quarterback who truly integrated his rare ability as a runner with his rapidly improving skills as a passer; who didn’t feel the need to define himself by one or the other; whose guiding principle was simply to *get another first down*. It was refreshing—not if you were an opposing defender, but certainly if you were sharing a locker room with Jackson, as Carr, now a free agent after 12 NFL seasons, did for two years.

“In 2020, this is how quarterbacks are going to play,” Carr said. “And I am pretty sure if you look at the little leagues right now, those coaches have been having their best player doing those things. We can redefine quarterback right now.”



ONE YEAR EARLIER, after the first playoff loss of his NFL career, Jackson had vowed to begin and end the 2019 season in Miami, site of Super Bowl LIV. The September opener against the Dolphins went as he planned but as no one else could have imagined: Jackson threw five touchdown passes with no interceptions and had a perfect passer rating in a 59–10 win. As he walked off the field in Hard Rock Stadium, he reached into the stands to give the white towel that had been tucked in his waistband to a teenage QB named Hezekiah Harris, the son of Jackson's throwing coach, Joshua Harris.

Jackson did end the season in Miami, too, but only to accept the MVP award. So he looked at Harris askance a few months after the playoff loss, when his coach said to him, "You're the MVP now."

Since they began working together before the 2018 draft, Harris has learned that the best way to motivate Jackson is to tell him something he did was garbage. For the fifth QB chosen in 2018 and a three-star recruit entering college, slights are motivating. So the MVP remark wasn't flattery from Harris—he was warning that the target on 6' 2", 212-pound Jackson's back would be even bigger in 2020. The rest of the league would be homing in on solutions to slow down the only QB in history to pass for 3,000 yards and rush for 1,000 in the same season.

> “THE STIGMA OF BEING ‘DUAL THREAT’ USED TO MEAN BEING A RUNNER,” SAYS HARRIS. “NOW IT REALLY MEANS DOING BOTH.”

"They're preparing for me," Jackson replied, "but I'm preparing even more for them." (Jackson declined an interview request for this story.)

Jackson's second season was a quantum leap from his first. That kind of jump is not unheard of for quarterbacks, though how it happened was. The Ravens changed offensive coordinators, promoting Greg Roman from tight ends coach; they went all in on a scheme that dared to feature their quarterback as the centerpiece of their passing and rushing attacks; and Jackson did what NFL evaluators have long considered rare—he became significantly more accurate as a passer. Last offseason Harris ran drills he learned while attending

ERA 8, QUICK 6

Jackson's dazzling 47-yard TD run in Cincinnati was one of the 2019 season's signature moments.

FRANK VICTORES/AP

a clinic with Tom House, throwing coach to greats such as Tom Brady and Drew Brees, to make sure Jackson's footwork was sure in the pocket, no matter how chaotic it got. Jackson's completion percentage soared from 58.2 as a rookie to 66.1.

But the way the season ended has been "the only thing on his mind," Harris says. Jackson told Complex's *Load Management* podcast earlier this year that the Ravens got caught "peeking ahead" as heavy favorites against the Titans. It wasn't that the game plan that had dominated opponents all season failed; instead, the Ravens ditched it once they fell behind 14–0, passing almost three times as often as they ran. Jackson moved the offense—Baltimore's 530 yards were the most in a playoff game over the past two postseasons—but two failed fourth-and-one conversions (after going 8 for 8 during a 14-win regular season) and three turnovers kept the Ravens from putting up points.

Even before this year's offseason program went virtual, Jackson was engrossing himself in film study. His Ravens coaches have praised his uncanny field vision, but he set out to amplify that by dissecting coverage disguises and quizzing himself on where he should go with the ball when he sees certain shifts and blitzes. "As he calls it, *getting his Tom Brady on*," Harris says. In early June, Jackson gathered teammates in Fort Lauderdale—before

the NFLPA had advised against such practices—for a few days of group work, refining his deep balls and throws outside the numbers. Harris noticed that Jackson had a tendency last year to spring up on his toes, causing him to pass with too much arm and lose velocity—an issue that especially showed up on those outside-the-numbers throws. They worked on keeping his cleats on the ground, forcing him to use his lower body and generate the necessary power on those more difficult deliveries.

“The stigma of being ‘dual threat’—and I say that with the air quotations—used to mean being a runner, but now it really means dual threat, doing both,” Harris says. “But I’ll be the first to say this: It’ll take consistency. If he comes back next year, he does similar or better, then people will start to realize, this is the way the position can be played.”

But there has already been a shift since Harris designed Jackson’s Pro Day workout at Louisville with all 59 of his throws under center, and some with multiple receivers crossing the field to simulate his going through a progression, addressing skeptics of his passing-game mastery head on. One of the 50 votes Jackson received as the unanimous MVP came from Bill Polian, the Hall of Fame general manager who suggested on ESPN’s platforms before the draft that the 2016 Heisman Trophy winner should play as a receiver in the NFL. Polian had praised Jackson’s dynamic abilities with the ball in his hands but questioned whether he had the durable frame or passing accuracy to project as an NFL quarterback.

“I was wrong. Simple as that,” Polian says now. “I didn’t see what [then Baltimore GM] Ozzie [Newsome] and John [Harbaugh] saw. They got past the idea that you can’t have a running quarterback—a guy whose game is a combination of throwing and running. They recognized that you could do that if the guy had enough shiftiness, enough ability to make tacklers miss, that he wasn’t exposing himself to a lot of big hits.” Polian adds, “The paradigm has changed, no question about it.”

Newsome, then preparing for his final draft, was adamant at the 2018 combine that on their draft board—one of the most respected in the league—Jackson was a QB. And after Jackson’s Pro Day workout, James Urban, Baltimore’s quarterbacks coach, found Harris and told him he loved what he saw. He had been on the Eagles staff when they had Michael Vick, and Harris recalls Urban asking questions about Jackson’s learning style.

The Ravens, of course, still passed on Jackson. They moved down from No. 16 to 22, then again to 25, where they selected a tight end that they’ve since dealt (Hayden Hurst). They traded back into Round 1 to take the future MVP at No. 32. In every draft room, including Baltimore’s, grades on Jackson varied because his skills challenged traditional scouting checklists. But his supporters were adamant: In one Ravens predraft meeting, an evaluator declared that Jackson would immediately be the franchise’s best athlete ever. Where Baltimore charted a new path was then building an offense unlike any the NFL has ever seen.

“I’m going to tell you the impact that Lamar has had,” says Doug Williams, Washington’s senior

“

LAMAR IS DISMANTLING ALL OF THOSE PRECONCEIVED IDEAS ABOUT WHAT A QUARTERBACK SHOULD BE,” SAYS HOWARD. “IT OPENS THE DOOR FOR KIDS LIKE MY SON.

”

VP of player development and the first Black QB to win a Super Bowl. “Unfortunately, you’re not going to get a Lamar Jackson every year. But the next Lamar Jackson that does come out, I don’t think the coaches and the scouts are going to sit around and say what he can’t do as a quarterback. They’re going to take a page out of Baltimore, and go back and get the tape and see what they did with Lamar Jackson, and use that. He’s giving them a little more hope now, because of what he’s done.”

MCNAIR PARK IN Pompano Beach, Fla., is located just off NW 9 Court, a street sign that also bears the name LAMAR JACKSON CT.

It’s hard not to tell that this is where Jackson grew up playing. Two of his Ravens jerseys are hanging in the lobby of the park’s rec center: a purple number 1, representing his first-round draft status, and a black number 8. The park is the home field of Jackson’s old youth club, the Pompano Cowboys, who each season award a Lamar Jackson Trophy to the best player in every age group.

This is the place where Jackson committed to playing quarterback, and where a network of young athletes in South Florida resolved to do the same.

When Jackson was eight, one of his youth coaches sent him to work with Van Warren, who leads the Cowboys’ 12-year-old team but had also made a habit of working with young QBs. “I’m not an expert by any stretch,” Warren admits, but he had thrown himself into this task out of frustration over seeing many of his Black youth players be told they wouldn’t make it as quarterbacks at the next level. He vowed to make their passing mechanics so impeccable that no coach could ever use that as a reason to deny them a shot.

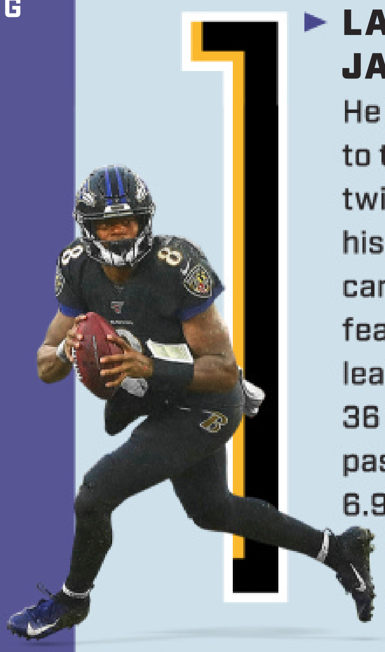
This is how the Sunday training sessions, from 2 p.m. to 6 p.m. at McNair Park, began—Warren and Jackson’s mom, Felicia Jones, building a quarterback in the heat of the South Florida sun. Jones has been an unwavering advocate for her son, who has said she led him through the day he lost both his grandmother and his father, as well as his athletic career. On Sundays, they had a routine: Warren would work on Jackson’s mechanics, unafraid to spend 20 minutes solely on his three-step drop, and Jones would put her son through a core workout, insistent that that would provide the balance he’d need to play the position. Perhaps the most grueling part was the rounds of 20-, 40- and 100-yard sprints.

When Jackson graduated from Boynton Beach High School, with a scholarship to Louisville, Warren assumed their Sunday afternoon tradition of the last decade was over. “No, we’re not done,” he recalls Jones telling him. “If we could do it for

PROGRESS REPORT

The 2018 draft featured
a look at how those

by **GARY GRAMLING**



▶ **LAMAR JACKSON**
He has been to the playoffs twice, and his 2019 MVP campaign featured a league-leading 36 touchdown passes and 6.9 yards per rushing attempt.

▶ **BAKER MAYFIELD**
A dysfunctional offense led to a sophomore slump. But a regime change, plus upgrades at both offensive tackle spots, should put the 2018 No. 1 pick back on track.

▶ **SAM DARNOLD**
2019 was a wild ride, as mono knocked him out of the lineup early and he struggled upon returning. Darnold has shown flashes, but a meek supporting cast holds him back.

him, this shows we can do it for others." So, they continued, together running a Sunday football clinic even after Jackson left for college, free of charge and open to any player willing to put in the same kind of work that Jackson did. Their goal is to help kids, some from economically disadvantaged parts of Broward County, earn a college scholarship.

They call their program "Super 8," teaching both football skills and eight core values: God, prayer, faith, family, education, sacrifice, character and discipline. When Jackson changed from number 7 to 8 when he arrived at Louisville ("A new era," Jones told Warren at the time, citing the Bible's teaching that the eighth day of creation represents the new beginning), they had to add one more value. Fitting to Jackson's path, the eighth one was faith.

Super 8 draws players of all positions, but Warren still devotes much of his time to the quarterbacks: One is 15-year-old Hezekiah Harris, which is how his dad, a high school coach and English teacher, first met Jackson and his family. Other regulars are 12-year-old Omari McNeal, who is motivated to win a Lamar Jackson Trophy for the Pompano Cowboys, and 16-year-old Luke Collins, a rising junior who aspires both to be a veterinarian and to play quarterback for a FBS team. Collins switched private schools between his freshman and sophomore seasons for a better opportunity to play QB; now he'll be the starter at Blanche Ely, a public high school in Pompano Beach.

PREMIER PARTNER OF
HEIS N

MOTHER'S NATURE

Jones has guided her son's career from the beginning.

"Many coaches have tried to push me to play DB, and that's not really me," Collins says. "I could play it, but that's not really where my heart was at. I have seen how [Jackson] was confident in himself, that this was what he was going to do; no matter what other coaches said, that he was a DB or receiver or running back, he stuck to quarterback. I'm going to do the same thing."

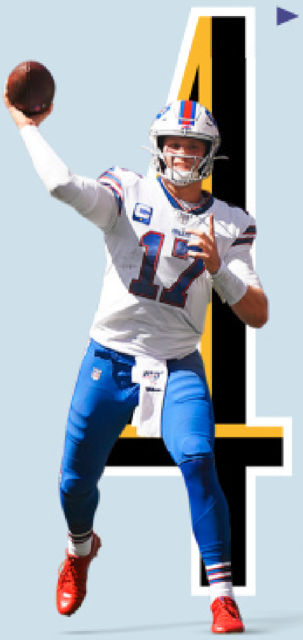
Jackson's career brought both him and his mom to Baltimore, but they are still regular visitors to McNair Park, nestled between industrial facilities and Florida's Turnpike. Jackson showed up one Sunday earlier this year, before the pandemic hit South Florida, and Warren stopped the workout, "which he never does," Collins says. Collins posed for a photo with Jackson, who was smiling in the sun. Then, they all got back to work. On a different Sunday, Luke and his dad, Corey, listened to Jones talk to the group for about an hour. She shared how Jackson sacrificed going to parties to train, the importance of taking college admission exams early and her role in insisting to coaches that Jackson was a quarterback.

Jones's choice to manage her son's career, forgoing an agent, was questioned before the draft, but she has become a beacon for parents who have seen their children's hopes dashed each time a coach suggests they move to another position.

Three years ago, when Jackson was still at Louisville, Jones was a guest speaker at a football clinic in West Palm Beach. During the Q and A portion, one of the kids asked Jones, "What position is Lamar going to play when he gets into the NFL?" She replied that he's always been a quarterback, and that's what he's going to be. Brandon Howard was in the audience that day with his son, Nehemiah. Brandon, who at the time was a sportswriter for a local newspaper, asked Jones for an interview, which she declined, as is her practice. But when he introduced her to Nehemiah and mentioned that he plays quarterback, she talked to Brandon as a parent: "You have to protect him and his dream."

Nehemiah, who is 10, played running back until he saw the famous clip of Jackson hurdling a Syracuse defender during his Heisman season. "I thought, 'I can do that,' so I tried playing quarterback,"

five quarterbacks in the first round. After two full seasons, prospects have fared—and how they'd rank now



► JOSH ALLEN

He's lived up to Cam Newton comparisons on the ground but lagged as a passer. Will the arrival of true No. 1 wideout Stefon Diggs enable Allen to take the next step?

► JOSH ROSEN

He struggled behind two hopeless lines—first in Arizona, then in Miami. Rosen is now buried on the depth chart, behind Ryan Fitzpatrick and Tua Tagovailoa.

RICH GRAESSLE/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (JONES AND JACKSON); SIMON BRUTY (JACKSON); ERICK W. RASCO (MAYFIELD, DARNOLD, ALLEN); STEVE MITCHELL/USA TODAY SPORTS (ROSEN)

HOME FIELD

Jackson returns to McNair Park every summer.

Nehemiah says. At age eight, after he had competed in the 100-meter dash at the Junior Olympics, a coach on Nehemiah's youth football team moved him to receiver. The Howards switched teams the next year (coincidentally to the Miami Gardens Ravens), where the staff told Nehemiah he could play QB and wear number 8, like Jackson.

"I thought back to what Felicia told me, and I didn't want him to lose confidence," Brandon says. "I love how Lamar is dismantling those preconceived ideas about what a quarterback should be and how he should play. It opens the door for kids like my son to be able to freely express themselves and play the game the way that it comes natural to them."

Earlier this summer, Joshua Harris noticed a new decoration in his son's bedroom: Jackson's towel had already been hanging on a mirror, and now a white piece of paper was taped to the ceiling. In red marker, Hezekiah had written WIN A STATE CHAMPIONSHIP and drawn three empty boxes, one for each year he has left at St. Thomas Aquinas High. Joshua didn't think much of it at first, but then he realized the sign appeared shortly after they had joined Jackson for his workouts with some of his Baltimore teammates.

Hezekiah explains, "Lamar never won a state championship, so he said, 'You've gotta win one for me.' I told him, 'I got you.' I put the sign on my ceiling for when I lay down in my bed, and I can always see it, to remind me that's the goal." A state title—as a quarterback.

JACKSON HAS HIS own championship goals to pursue, in the city he's invigorated in so many ways. Cia Carter, the owner of Miss Carter's Kitchen, says she saw a 15% increase in business after she posted the QB's visit in January. The fact that he and his teammates dropped by a Black-owned restaurant in West Baltimore, she says, represents the unique connection the majority-Black city has to its franchise QB.

"He comes from the same place that most of the kids in Baltimore City come from," Carter says. "We can relate to him, we can feel him, we understand him and he understands us. How he talks, how he dresses, how he carries himself, how he plays—we connect with him."

That ability Jackson has to connect—with young QBs in South Florida, with his new city, with his teammates—was undervalued in the predraft process, perhaps just as much as his passing ability. Williams has been around the NFL long enough to see a shift from 1978, when he was "Tampa Bay's Black QB" after being drafted, to last year, when the playoff field had four Black starters under center. But in a league that is about 70% Black, the shortfall of Black talent evaluators and decision-makers means that biases persist in the grading and, ultimately, drafting of players. "They might not ask the right questions to find out who a kid really is," Williams says. "So you might not find out how well he can lead, or how he grew up."

Everything that teams missed about Jackson was on full display last season, whether in his spinning off and sliding through six Bengals defenders en route to a 47-yard touchdown run or telling Harbaugh "hell yeah," he wanted to go for it on a fourth-and-two in Seattle that turned into a touchdown. While he jokes that his play is "not bad for a running back," he doesn't strain to prove himself as a pocket passer, an unusual combination of both humility and confidence.

"The swagger that he plays with isn't super traditional for the quarterback position," right tackle Orlando Brown Jr. said in January. "As a Black quarterback, he represents a lot. It's something that we talked about. . . . He's opened so many doors."

But that is not top of mind for Jackson right now—not yet. Warren recalls a mantra that Jackson's mom has often repeated: *Talking doesn't fix anything.* His actions are what will provide a different answer to the same old questions, and he still has more to show. □

JC RUIZ PHOTOGRAPHY

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NATURAL? YES.
DELICIOUS? YES.
OSCAR MAYER?
ABSOLUTELY!
Oscar Mayer
Oscar Mayer
NATURAL
HICKORY SMOKED
UNCURED HAM
CONTAINS UP TO 17% OF A SEASONING SOLUTION
NO ANTIBIOTICS EVER
NO ARTIFICIAL INGREDIENTS
NO NITRITES OR NITRATES ADDED
NO ARTIFICIAL INGREDIENTS. NO ANTIBIOTICS. EVER.

FOREVER
YOUNG
32
NFL

NFL
FOOTBALL PREVIEW
2020

Controlled CHAOS

by **GREG BISHOP**

photograph by
JEFFERY A. SALTER

The MMQB

A nomadic star, ***TYRANN MATHIEU*** became the missing piece in the Chiefs' Super Bowl puzzle. And amid the turbulence of a pandemic and social upheaval, he emerged as one of the most prominent voices among athlete activists

TYRANN MATHIEU LOOKED UP, past the red-and-gold confetti falling from the sky, and saw only stars, like the whole galaxy had been lit. He could hardly speak. He couldn't move. The screaming fans, the euphoric teammates, the thuds of bass coming from the speakers—it all faded into a dreamlike silence. Mathieu asked himself a question he already knew the answer to: How in the world did I end up here?

On the night the Chiefs secured their first Super Bowl berth in half a century last January, he climbed atop a stage that had been wheeled onto the Arrowhead Stadium turf. He watched the family of late team founder Lamar Hunt accept the trophy that bears his name. The packed crowd stuck around through the freezing temperatures, the diehards dancing and crying.

Mathieu spotted Brett Veach. The GM had signed him before the season and promised that the free-agent safety would elevate Kansas City after years of missteps and heartbreak (for both franchise and player) back to the pinnacle. Then Mathieu flashed back to absolute bottom. The funerals, the failed drug tests, the injuries. Had he really considered retirement? He drifted back, remembering how eventually he found himself, and then his chi, and then his voice, with help from a spiritual adviser, a naturopathic doctor and a mindfulness coach.

BALL HAWK

Mathieu's ability to line up in multiple spots—and thrive—makes him valuable. But his ability to roam as a free safety has made him indispensible in K.C.

AARON ONTIVEROZ/MEDIANEWS GROUP/THE DENVER POST/GETTY IMAGES

Finally, two teammates broke the trance. Tight end Travis Kelce grabbed Mathieu by the shoulders. Quarterback Patrick Mahomes jumped on his back. Both players told the safety how much they appreciated him, how much he had meant to their playoff run, continuing in that night's triumph over the Titans. Grips tightened. Tears welled. "It's never a power struggle, never an ego thing," Mathieu says. "We're just some dudes who want to play ball, and at that moment we realized, in a sense, that we're perfect for each other."

Mahomes turned to some more teammates, pulling the "Remember what I told you when you signed?" he asked Mathieu, who nodded.

"Let's start a dynasty."

The stars had aligned around the safety, but Mathieu did not feel bliss, nerves or even accomplishment. Instead, he felt balance, peace. Through discomfort, he had discovered something unexpected: his own brand of Zen.

> "I KNEW WE HAD WON THE SUPER BOWL, BUT I JUST DIDN'T FEEL LIKE I HAD THAT RESPECT. I FELT LIKE: NOW I GOTTA DO IT AGAIN."

TODAY'S TYRANN MATHIEU can hardly recognize previous iterations of himself. But to arrive here, as a cornerstone of a Super Bowl champion and a prominent voice for social justice, he had to first examine everything that went wrong. Only then could he make everything right.

He had to look back at his well-chronicled childhood in New Orleans—the father who went to prison for second-degree murder . . . the mother who dropped him on his grandparents' doorstep . . . friend after friend after friend shot and killed. So deep were his feelings of abandonment, so low was his sense of self-worth, that even at St. Augustine, a majority-Black Catholic school that teaches grace and acceptance and empowerment, he clashed with those who tried to help him. "I saw a flickering of purpose," says Del Lee-Collins, his high school coach and mentor. "But early on, our relationship was love-hate. He didn't understand what I was trying to get out of him."

Sure, Mathieu could run, jump, tackle and defend. And he did all that, mostly by channeling the rage that surged like electricity inside him. He could drop into an LSU football camp, ignore the chaos that spun his life in every direction and show coach Les Miles that he deserved a scholarship, even at 5' 9". Miles could tell, though, that the young man looked upon himself through a fun-house mirror, his perception warped. Mathieu saw a singularly focused athlete who didn't deserve to be happy, and who didn't love himself, making it hard for him to love anybody else.

In Baton Rouge, Miles noticed those same flickers as Collins once had, only they were happening more often and more intensely, as Mathieu flipped between who he was and what he wanted to become. Mathieu was one of the most versatile players Miles ever coached. On the field, he returned punts, intercepted passes, jumped over blockers, patrolled the secondary, sacked quarterbacks and forced fumbles. He claimed the Chuck Bednarik Award as the nation's top defender in 2011 and that fall earned a rare invitation for a defender to the Heisman ceremony. With his distinctive blond hair and unforgettable Honey Badger nickname, Mathieu—a *defensive back*—became the most recognizable player in college football.

The following August, though, Miles kicked Mathieu off the team. He'd failed too many drug tests—at least 10, according to media reports—and broken too many rules. “It was the hardest thing I ever had to do,” the coach says. Mathieu was never late, never lazy, never a distraction on the field—he just couldn't stay out of trouble off of it. When Miles booted him, he stayed silent. He knew.

In the 2013 NFL draft, Mathieu plummeted all the way to the third round, to Arizona. He tore his left ACL that rookie season, busted a thumb in Year 2, tore his other ACL in Year 3 and separated his right shoulder in Year 4. Four seasons, four injuries, 16 games missed (including playoffs).

He started to doubt himself more deeply; the feeling bolstered when the Cardinals drafted his replacement and then cut Mathieu following the 2017 season. The Texans signed him for cheap and discarded him after one year. At times he wondered whether football was really for him; he considered what a different life might look like. He questioned whether anybody really loved him and, he admits, sabotaged much of the support he got.

“Most people would say I'm too good to be on my third team,” he says. That's true. And yet, there he was.

For years, Mathieu wondered why he always had to take—or had always taken—the hardest route. Breaks never seemed to fall his way. Why did he hold onto (or pick at) so many wounds?

M**ATHIEU CANNOT PINPOINT** his exact low point. The nadir didn't result from checking into rehab for marijuana use in 2012. Or when he spent a night in jail on a marijuana charge and had his cellmates tell him to look around, that he didn't belong there. Or when he showed up at McNeese State later that year, hoping to transfer, dressed to display disengagement: a stained tank top and shorts.

Each time, he told himself the same thing. *Something's gotta change. I can't live like this anymore. I'm wasting my potential.* Even then, he never could sustain progress. There were always fits and starts.

Looking back, Mathieu says no one had ever taught him how to process his emotions. Or build and sustain healthy relationships. Or express empathy and gratitude. Upon his arrival in Arizona, in 2013, he sought guidance, trying to take control of his life away from football, hoping that might correct his path. He met Donny Starkins, a mindfulness coach and yogi who had worked with the Phoenix Suns and other pro athletes, and said, “I've

ROADS TAKEN

Mathieu starred at LSU (left) before a stint in rehab. He spent five seasons with the Cardinals (right) and one in Houston.

ANDREW HANCOCK (COVER); BOB LEVEY/GETTY IMAGES (TEXANS)

WHO CAN BEAT 'BAMA?
THE CASE FOR NOTRE DAME
LANCE ARMSTRONG “A MASSIVE FRAUD NOW MORE FULLY EXPOSED” P. 40
Sports Illustrated
TIGERS
ENDANGERED
THE PERILOUS ROAD OF THE HONEY BADGER
BY THAYER EVANS AND PETE THAMEL
LSU
7
“IT'S NOT CRAZY FOR HIM NOW. IT WILL GET CRAZY WHEN HE GETS BACK TO BEING THE HONEY BADGER.”

been looking for somebody like you.” He saved the contact in his phone as Donny the Yogi.

Donny the Yogi had played college baseball at Nebraska and Arizona State. He, too, had sustained injuries, endured surgeries, experienced addiction and sought meaning, identity and purpose. Early in their conversations, he and Mathieu dove deep into an important but elusive concept for the safety: self-love. Donny the Yogi encouraged Mathieu to find his center, first by understanding all the baggage he carried with him, and then through yoga and meditation, which would help him to let go. He tried to disabuse Mathieu of the notion that football alone made him worthwhile and helped him to focus, eliminate distractions, breathe. “Happiness,” he said, “is an inside job.”

Progress wasn’t linear. Mathieu earned first-team All-Pro with the Cardinals in 2015. He dropped the Honey Badger nickname and started most mornings with meditation sessions outside in the desert sun. But the injuries exacted a new psychological toll. Lee-Collins visited after the second ACL tear and says: “I saw how it was weighing on him. He was doing everything right, and then—*Bam!*”

Mathieu plunged deeply inward, holding a magnifying glass to his battered soul. He went to therapy and drew praise from Cardinals coaches for his leadership. He became vulnerable in ways teammates never could have expected, sharing his story and his path—and how he took back control. He became a walking self-help book, its dust jacket covered in scars.

After the second knee tear he started visiting Suneil Jain, a naturopath who believes in treating the body as a whole. Jain studied what he calls Mathieu’s metabolic deficiencies and changed the safety’s diet. He deployed Western and Eastern and homeopathic methods and discouraged medicine except in extreme instances, instead focusing on acupuncture and nontraditional therapies.

Mathieu also heard from a local pastor, Scott Savage, over Twitter. Mathieu, in his increasingly urgent pursuit of meaning and affection, responded to the stranger. His grandmother, Marie Spellman Mathieu, always the most stable force in his life, fell ill and died in the spring of 2016. The two men bonded over grief, and the safety started attending church. Savage helped to unravel the trauma, peeling deep. One day Mathieu pulled up his left pants leg and revealed tributes to 20 of his closest friends, all dead before Mathieu himself had left for college—the torture tattooed across his lower half.

Mathieu was still processing all of that, but now he had the help of his own Three Wise Men—the pastor, the naturopath and the yogi. He began to see himself in different mirrors. As a present father of three children. As a stable, positive force. He still screwed up—“all the time,” he says—but the tools he was learning kept his emotions largely in check, including when he was released or passed over. After the Texans chose not to re-sign him following the 2018 season, he thanked coach Bill O’Brien for what he’d learned, for the ways O’Brien had pushed him to lead. In Houston he had been named captain in a matter of months, becoming a stable force and positive impact.

That spring, Mathieu weighed his options. The Chiefs’ defensive coordinator, Steve Spagnuolo, reached out to O’Brien, who told him, “This guy changed the culture here the day he walked through the door.” When Kansas City signed the safety to a three-year, $42 million deal, Veach named Mathieu—the same guy who’d been kicked off his team and left school, gone to rehab and jail,

CHRISTIAN PETERSEN/GETTY IMAGES

HE TRIED TO DISABUSE MATHIEU OF THE NOTION THAT FOOTBALL ALONE MADE HIM WORTHWHILE. “HAPPINESS,” HE SAID, “IS AN INSIDE JOB.

and battled injury after injury—“the catalyst.”

Each morning, Mathieu would meditate and tell himself: *Stay in balance.*

IN KANSAS CITY, Mathieu and Spags bonded immediately. Perhaps that started with flattery. The coach told his new safety that he evoked Brian Dawkins, the Hall of Famer he oversaw in Philadelphia. He said, “You’re the guy I always wanted to coach,” and promised he wouldn’t move Mathieu all over the field, like others had. He wanted Mathieu to play free safety—to roam on instinct, blitzing regularly.

His coordinator’s belief meant everything to Mathieu. His belief in himself meant even more. He fit well in Kansas City—a homebody who loved football and barbecue and carried an ethos of everyman toughness. City, team and fan base loved him back; they’d seen elite defenders in recent seasons, but never one like Mathieu, who claims, “I do things no other safety does.” He would tip the Chiefs over the edge, one way or another.

For a while, though, the franchise’s 2019 season took a turn toward mediocrity. Injuries piled up, with Mahomes playing through a bum ankle early and later missing two games after dislocating his kneecap. When slot corner Kendall Fuller joined the QB in the training room, with a busted thumb in Week 6, Spagnuolo had to undo his promise, moving Mathieu all over the field, like the queen on a defensive chessboard.

Mathieu can pinpoint the exact weekend the season was saved. The Chiefs were 6–4 in mid-November, headed to Mexico City to play the Chargers. The safety believed his teammates were making too many excuses, starting with Mahomes’s injuries, but they were also banking on the eventual coalescence of a revamped defensive unit. Finally, he and Spags addressed the group. The time had come, they said, to eliminate all the explanations and justifications. *Just play ball.*

The Chiefs turned inward, like their safety. They topped the Chargers, healed up over the Week 12 bye and never lost again. Mahomes rounded back into MVP form, and the defense, led by Mathieu, defensive tackle Chris Jones and edge rusher Frank Clark, sparked a late-season surge. A unit that ranked 31st in total defense in 2018 was suddenly among the most feared in the league, allowing an average of 11.7 points over the last seven weeks, sometimes winning with stout D rather than typically prolific Mahomes performances. “A lot of our wins weren’t pretty,” concedes Mathieu. “But if you took our logo off the helmet and put another team’s on, you would have said we were dominant.”

For the first time since 2015, Mathieu was named All-Pro, but his impact stretched beyond anything measured by stats or awards. Down 24–0 to the Texans in the divisional round, he ran up and down the Kansas City sideline, imploring teammates to look across the field. “You should’ve seen them,” he says of his old Houston teammates. “Pom-poms, popcorn. . . . They thought the game was over, man. I wanted my teammates to smell that blood.” Of course, he had been up when the team was down, thriving in discomfort yet again.

One week later the Chiefs came back and toppled the Titans. Mathieu zoned out afterward onstage.

“You have to see the moment,” he says months later, echoing his mindfulness coach, “in order to really seize it.”

MATHIEU
32
SANDERS
17

CHAMPIONS
15
32
LIV
AFC CHAMPIONS
MIAMI BOUND

CENTER STAGE

Before starring in Super Bowl LIV, Mathieu had a surreal moment with Mahomes (left) and Kelce after the AFC title game.

FROM TOP: ELSA/GETTY IMAGES; DAVID E. KLUTHO

THE NEWLY SPIRITUAL safety carried that Zen with him to Super Bowl LIV, and he brought his Three Wise Men along, too. Jain performed daily acupuncture and alternative therapy sessions. Savage lent emotional support. And in addition to yoga and mindfulness sessions, Donny the Yogi shared a 13-minute-long mindset visualization audio file, telling Mathieu things like “tune in to the quality of your breath” and “make a picture, if you will, of a future you: focused, grounded and ready for all four quarters.” Mathieu listened to this “mental rehearsal” the night before the game, and again before he sprinted onto the field.

Against the 49ers, with their endless options, Mathieu figured the offense would throw and run away from him, but still he visualized making plays, as he always had. Notice that your entire body is filled with fresh energy, and the world appears more beautiful than ever. . . . *You can see with more clarity. . . . You can feel yourself more alive. . . . You’ve never been faster. . . . You’ve never felt better. . . . You are fully immersed in this moment—right here, right now.*

At Hard Rock Stadium in Miami Gardens, as Mathieu trotted out onto the field for warm-ups, Del Lee-Collins held onto his old player’s one-month-old daughter, Mila, and allowed himself to look back on the path to the pinnacle, on the love-hate turned pure love.

On the field, he watched as the Chiefs fell behind. The 49ers did steer their offense away from Mathieu, but three of the tackles he made arguably saved touchdowns. He kept his teammates communicating as they fell behind, kept them talking and staying present, even if the scene may have looked like a sideline freakout on TV. In actuality, Mathieu was pleading with his teammates to stay calm.

After the comeback and the victory, the same player who was thrown off his college team for drug use—who went to rehab—steered clear of the championship party. Mathieu hung out with family and friends and a yogi and a naturopathic doctor at his hotel instead. Watching that all unfold, Lee-Collins says, “All I saw was growth.”

Asked what that moment represented to him, Mathieu pauses for five seconds. Finally, he says, “I don’t know, man. Like, I knew we won the Super Bowl, but I just didn’t feel like I had that respect. I felt like: Now I gotta do it again.” Of course, he was now down when the team was up, the lack of chaos twinned with his lack of satisfaction, fueling the next round of introspection, and the next round of growth.

ON THE NIGHT Mathieu first became aware of the video footage that showed a Minneapolis police officer killing George Floyd, he couldn’t bring himself to watch the whole eight minutes and 46 seconds. He looked at his three children, each under the age of nine, and worried about the toxic culture of the world he’d brought them into. “Being a Black dude in America, [what happened to George Floyd] is something that we always knew was possible,” he says. “I feel for kids who have to grow up in that kind of world.”

Could he affect it? This summer, while sports were paused and protests forced America to again reconsider its terrible racial history, Mathieu, now 28, took a call from Michael Thomas. The Saints receiver wanted to make a video featuring some of the most prominent players in the league, and he wanted them to push the NFL toward recognizing the Black Lives Matter movement, to acknowledge that players have a voice and to encourage them to speak.

“I’m all in,” Mathieu replied.

Neither player felt that the league had sufficiently responded to Floyd’s killing. And Mathieu, specifically, believes the NFL did wrong by Colin Kaepernick. With that in mind, he sent text messages, hopped on FaceTime calls and became a salesman for Thomas, helping to recruit for the video Cardinals receiver DeAndre Hopkins and cornerback Patrick Peterson; Texans quarterback Deshaun Watson; and Mahomes, the emerging face of the league. “Pat was important,” Mathieu says. “Huge.”

The video came out, spreading quickly all over the world. Commissioner Roger Goodell responded on Twitter, using the phrase “Black Lives Matter” and acknowledging that players had the right to protest—a full pivot from the league’s stance when Kaepernick started kneeling in 2016.

In Kansas City, the events following Floyd’s death inspired conversations among teammates, and Mathieu, having found a focus outside of football, was at the forefront. Owner Clark Hunt called up him and the other captains, and Mathieu dove right in, hammering the lack of minority coaches across the league and stressing the importance of

> “WE’RE JUST SOME DUDES WHO WANT TO PLAY BALL, AND AT THAT MOMENT WE REALIZED, IN A SENSE, THAT WE WERE PERFECT FOR EACH OTHER.”

FACING REALITY

Mathieu was instrumental in coordinating social justice efforts among NFL players.

Black voter registration. Hunt, Veach and coach Andy Reid organized Zoom calls for the entire team, and no one mentioned football. Instead, Black players detailed their life experiences to white executives, and for weeks this went on, even in position meetings.

"A lot of times when they're paying you millions of dollars, it's like, *All right, get to work*," Mathieu says. "Here, it seemed like football took a backseat. You could feel the intensity, the passion. [People] wanted to understand."

Mathieu was not new to activism—he'd started a foundation to help disadvantaged children, submitted himself to being locked in a hot car for a PETA campaign and donated 30,000 meals to Kansas City families after COVID-19 spread. As the world protested in the wake of Floyd's death, he donated money and helped secure speakers for an organization that mentors at-risk youth around New Orleans and Baton Rouge. He continued to promote Black Lives Matter dialogue within the Chiefs franchise, speaking regularly with Hunt. This, perhaps as much as hoisting the Lombardi Trophy, gave him a sense of fulfillment, a dual purpose. "I feel myself tapping into [activism] more as I get older," Mathieu says. "That's how you make the world better. That's how you create change."

As Savage, the pastor, watched Mathieu act on their conversations, he told anyone who'd listen that they needed to know two things about the safety formerly known as Honey Badger. One: He'd lived through more pain than anyone Savage had ever met. And two: He was the most generous person Savage knew.

"In essence, he created what he had always needed," Savage says. "Stability. Empowerment. Positive influences. And now he's giving to other people what nobody ever gave to him."

SAVAGE SAYS THAT Mathieu hardly celebrated after the Super Bowl because he no longer needed to. He no longer defined himself by football alone.

On the Super Bowl stage Mathieu again found himself next to Kelce and Mahomes. Only this time, amid another confetti shower, no one mentioned a dynasty. They didn't have to.

Earlier this summer, Mathieu pestered Veach, telling him to keep the Chiefs intact. When he saw Mahomes sign a contract in July that could earn him half a billion dollars, he tapped out a few text messages. To the GM: "Yo, bro, you really just did that." Then, to the QB: "I don't believe you know how special you really are." Finally, he exchanged a few notes with Reid, who tapped back, "Man, if I have you and Patrick, I can coach until I'm 90."

The safety has stayed home in Kansas City these past few months, just as he would have without a pandemic. He has even set up a yoga area in the basement where he can meditate and work out. If the season starts on time, he plans to play. It's not his job, he says, to assess the risk. (He also notes that, in his career, he has already missed a full season's worth of games.) "It's all about keeping the balance," he says, "staying positive, not feeling overwhelmed."

Sometimes Mathieu will probe his coaches for tips on how to maintain last season's success. They'll tell him that a dynasty—like happiness or a career resurgence—"is an inside job." This spring and summer, as the pandemic unfolded like an apocalypse and racial unrest defined an unstable America, Mathieu used the turbulence to fuel his preparation to make good on all the dynasty talk. In discomfort, he had found his Zen. Now, the world is anything but settled, and Tyrann Mathieu, of course, feels grounded, stable and at peace. □

JEFFERY A. SALTER

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MONTANA
19
WARNING

The MMQB by **CONOR ORR**

photograph by **JOHN BIEVER**

NFL FOOTBALL PREVIEW 2020

NEW KID IN TOWN

A franchise-icon quarterback leaving late in his career for a new challenge? Hey, Tom, you can learn a few things from ***JOE MONTANA*** and his two-season stint as a Chief

► **JOE MONTANA'S LEGACY** in Kansas City began with a rancid smell wafting through the offensive meeting room.

It brought to mind rotten eggs, or, less diplomatically, a fart, cruel and penetrating enough to stand out amid a group of sweaty grown men enduring merciless two-a-days in the Missouri heat. It was so putrid and unrelenting that the meeting, the unit's first, was called off and the room was evacuated.

Landing Montana in a trade was a big deal for the Chiefs, who, despite their success in the years leading up to his arrival, starved for more consistency at the quarterback position. In his new home, Montana was not the oft-injured statue who was replaced by Steve Young in San Francisco. He was Hendrix at Monterey.

During the breathless coverage of Montana's recruitment the previous spring, a Kansas City radio station would accompany any news with the song "Lawyers, Guns and Money" by Warren Zevon,

CHIEFS + JOE =
SUPER BOWL

> MONTANA MADE THE SOCIAL ASPECT OF HIS JOB LOOK AS EFFORTLESS AS THE PHYSICAL, WHICH THOSE AROUND HIM INSISTED WAS JUST AS IMPORTANT.

with the clear message being: Utilize all three, if necessary, to get him here.

As they left the room, players began to wonder who was responsible for releasing the stench—who had dared to cross Marty Schottenheimer before his big monologue. The coach did not tolerate nonsense and was already on edge, having spent the offseason luring Montana away from the 49ers (and the Cardinals, who had offered Montana $5 million more). Breaking open a tube of ammonium hydrosulfide, better known as a stink bomb, seemed like a death wish.

Slowly Montana, 37, a four-time Super Bowl champion, seven-time Pro Bowler and two-time Most Valuable Player, emerged as the primary suspect. And so began two years of epic pranks, decadent meals and undeniable cool: the perfect blueprint for a GOAT switching franchises.

“People were walking on eggshells at this meeting because it’s Joe Montana,” says Danan Hughes, a rookie wide receiver at the time. “But everyone said it was Joe that did it, as an icebreaker. He wanted people to know he was one of the guys, and that he was nothing special.”

Twenty-seven years later, Tom Brady agreed to terms with the Buccaneers, embarking on a similar journey from a dynasty he helped create to a town starving for football relevance and celebrity power. No longer under the thumb of Bill Belichick, Brady has already carved out a presence in Florida that has ranged from swaggering (bursting into a random person’s home because he thought it belonged to his new offensive coordinator) to openly defiant and, by some measures of public health, irresponsible (disobeying local coronavirus ordinances by holding workouts in public parks). But ask guys who played with Montana back in 1993 and ’94 and they’ll tell you the heaviest lift is yet to come.

Teammates and coaches remember Montana as a man at ease with his place in life; someone who could glide around an unfamiliar locker room and instantly win over his new teammates. Montana made the social aspect of his job look as effortless as the physical, which those around him insisted was just as important.

During his introductory conference call in Tampa a few weeks back, Brady was asked about Montana’s journey and what he took away from it, having grown up idolizing the quarterback. During his response, stuck in the middle of an elongated platitude about keeping one’s body in shape and working hard, was perhaps the most painfully honest thing Brady has said since moving on from New England.

“Life continues to change for all of us,” he said.

That is true. But what if that change requires you to revert to the man you were 20 years ago?

THOSE WHO KNEW the young Tom Brady remember someone who would eagerly bring Dunkin’ Donuts into the facility for early-morning meetings (these were the days before his breakfasts required tempeh or avocado mousse) and dote on the defensive coordinators looking for a quarterback to simulate Sunday’s opponent. Back then, he seemed to possess the emotional intelligence required to advance in one of the NFL’s few meritocracies. He was personable and gracious, someone who would bump into the recently signed emergency long snapper in the bathroom and already know something about him. Later, by all appearances, he was smart enough to realize that

DAMIAN STROHMEYER (TOP); JOHN BIEVER

LIKE A DREAM
Montana was an immediate hit in the stands and on the field, an outcome that is the ultimate goal of Brady (above, imagined with former and current teammate Rob Gronkowski).

MATTHEW EMMONS/USA TODAY SPORTS; PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY BRYCE WOOD

keeping up the image of the eager, wide-eyed rookie with everything to prove was good for business.

For years, Belichick treated one of the most famous humans on earth as the complete opposite, underpinning the entire Patriots ethos: that no one person was more important than any other.

By the time he had become an established star, Brady stopped going to Outlaw biker bar with the rest of the offensive linemen, but he made every small barbecue. He compiled elaborate, night-before game cut-up videos that were essentially a brain dump of all his weekly notes to share with the rest of the class, something former teammates say they have never witnessed anywhere else.

He had an internal list of how best to treat his teammates. A Randy Moss mistake was addressed in private, off the field, in a quiet moment between their adjacent lockers. A Wes Welker mistake, on the other hand, could be loudly and publicly raised, as if one were training a Labrador retriever.

"You have to be a part of the group, but also above the group," says Matt Cassel, a New England teammate of Brady's for four seasons. "When we did manage to go out together he was just one of the guys. Having laughs. He has a great personality. You can joke with him. He's a normal guy."

Still, Brady spent the better part of two decades with the Patriots sublimating his swagger to preserve his team's identity. Montana, on the other hand, was Joe Cool, the guy who authored moments such as the Catch and the Chicken Soup Game.

Despite all that Brady had sacrificed for the team—including millions over the years to help with the salary cap—Montana had an easier departure, given that he had missed virtually all of the previous two years with an elbow injury and Young had just led the Niners to a 14–2 season. "Unlike Tom, Joe felt like it was time to leave," says Paul Hackett, Montana's offensive coordinator in Kansas City. "Joe had been replaced. There wasn't a question about whether or not it was time to leave."

On the Tuesday night he arrived in Kansas City, he asked his new center, Tim Grunhard, to grab a beer at a spot called Kelly's. The place was empty. These were the days before cellphones and social media geotags. Within a half hour, Grunhard remembered, the place turned into "St. Patrick's Day," with Montana graciously mobbed, at home and in love with his new lot in life.

Stink bombs aside, Montana did not barrel into his new locker room in Kansas City, but integrated himself slowly through a series of small gestures. Grunhard said that Montana was the first and only quarterback he saw to take the blame for a botched QB-center exchange. Montana would spend the week after wins taking his teammates out to dinner, position group by position group, to thank them for keeping him upright.

During a game plan installation early in the season, Schottenheimer stopped a meeting when the team arrived at short-yardage and goal-line situations and took the team out on the field to practice live. The offensive staff was dialed in, frantically lining up the first play when everyone realized that the quarterback was nowhere to be found.

Montana had somehow managed to slide out of the belly of Arrowhead Stadium, climbing up the steps armed with a water balloon cannon and a stockpile of ammunition. "You have to do things like that," Hackett says. "I'll bet that, heading into that practice, I was taking things too seriously. And then, one of the first people he hit with a balloon was me. So how am I going to react?

"That was part of Joe's magic. Real magic."

Sacks were his fault. So were interceptions and drops. Offensive linemen felt like his kids, far more wary of disappointing dad than getting screamed at. They developed a way to check on each other on Mondays after games. One member of the crew would sheepishly ask the quarterback whether, after meetings, he'd be able to go out and play a round of golf. A *yes* would indicate that the protection was satisfactory the day before. A *no* would be the nicest possible way Montana could say "get your s--- together."

Once a comfort level was established, Montana was able to solidify his hold on the locker room by acting as the player representative during Schottenheimer's most tyrannical moments. The interplay between Montana and Schottenheimer was something of a ballet, with the coach knowing he needed to cede some power to the quarterback and Montana knowing he needed to advocate for his teammates without overstepping any boundaries.

Martin Bayless, the team's defensive MVP in 1993, remembers a particularly wicked stretch of 16 consecutive days of full contact two-a-days that left the roster battered and mentally worn down. On the eve of Day 17, as a player mutiny began to develop, Montana told them he would take care of it.

In front of the full-team meeting later that day, he stood up and said: "Hey, Marty, these guys have been working pretty hard. How about a day off?"

Schottenheimer smiled and said: "I recruited you already, so sit down. We're practicing twice."

On Day 18, Schottenheimer gave the team their first vacation day.

LEAVING LEGENDS

Big-name quarterbacks who departed friendly, familiar confines for new challenges have had very mixed results

JOHNNY UNITAS

After 17 years as a Colt, his Willie Mays–as-a-Met moment came with the woeful 1973 Chargers.

THEY ALL LOOKED over as he sauntered into the huddle, Monday night, Week 7 against John Elway and the Broncos. It was his second season in Kansas City; in his first, Montana had taken the Chiefs to an 11–5 record and within a game of the Super Bowl. Now, they were down by four points late in the fourth quarter and had the ball at their own 25-yard line. In the huddle before calling a pass play to Marcus Allen, Montana looked at his teammates, smiled and said: "Hey, any of you check out the chaps on those cheerleaders?"

This was a recycled Montana bit, of course, but, man, did it feel cool to hear it live. He'd famously asked his 49ers teammates whether they noticed actor John Candy in the stands before embarking on a 92-yard game-winning drive in Super Bowl XXIII. Juxtaposing the outward chaos with an almost equally maniacal sense of calm did not get old. This was football mindfulness at its peak. He did it because it worked.

But against Denver, he kept going.

“Listen, guys, this is what I do,” he said, like a plumber approaching a clogged sink. “Relax, give me some time, and we’re going to win.”

“We knew, at that point, we were going to win that football game,” Grunhard said. “Joe really and truly believed that. So we did too.”

Montana went 6 of 7 on the ensuing TD drive, throwing for all but 10 of the team’s yards. Not bad for a man whose elbow had routinely blossomed to the size of a palmable children’s basketball. Whose back ached. Whose knees hurt. Who had no earthly reason to be here other than the love of the performance. The devotion to the bit.

Nine months earlier, he’d walked into the locker room at halftime of a playoff matchup with the Houston Oilers in which the Chiefs trailed 10–0. Buddy Ryan’s defense had been landing one haymaker blitz after another. The room was silent. Montana had just whipped an incomplete pass off Willie Davis’s fingertips at the end of the quarter and was ecstatic about it. Something felt right. He told everyone that he had it all figured out. Everything was going to be fine. And the Chiefs scored 28 second-half points to win by a touchdown.

At another practice, during his first weeks with the team, the secondary had acquired intel on the plays the offense would run during a red zone practice and were prepared to eat Montana alive, jumping on all his primary reads and gobbling interceptions. A few minutes later, they headed to the sidelines on water break totally dejected. Despite his new teammates knowing what would happen, Montana went a perfect 9 of 9.

Moments like that were common in Montana’s two years in Kansas City, when he led the team to a pair of playoff berths before retiring for good. The pressing question when any legend moves from one place to another is *How much of the magic was his own and how much belonged to the team?* This is the lunacy of insisting on proving it all again, the reason we find so many more of our legends out decompressing in a vineyard somewhere. Who would feel the need to do it all over? Who would lay themselves this bare?

With the glow of secure retirement in the near distance, Montana did, pushing through the minutiae of a new system and a new routine, making new friends with 300-pound linemen when high rollers at golf courses all over the country would have forked over five figures just to kiss his rings for 18 holes. It worked for Montana because he made those connections; it also helped that his play answered that pressing question.

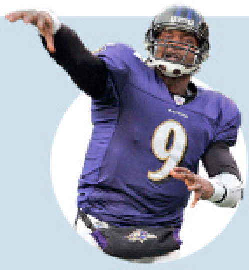
“Once he got on the field, he was Joe,” Bayless says. “He was magic.” □

JOE NAMATH

Broadway Joe was benched after a 2–2 start for the Super Bowl–contending Rams in 1977.

KEN STABLER

The former Raider took Houston to an 11–5 mark in 1980, but ’81 was a 7–9 disaster.



STEVE MCNAIR

The Titans’ titan led the 2006 Ravens to 13 wins, but played only six more games.

BRETT FAVRE

He bombed as a Jet but then re-created some Pack magic with the rival Vikings in a 12-win 2009.

> “LISTEN, GUYS, THIS IS WHAT I DO,” HE SAID, LIKE A PLUMBER FACING A CLOGGED SINK. “RELAX, GIVE ME SOME TIME, AND WE’RE GOING TO WIN THIS FOOTBALL GAME.”

FOCUS ON SPORT/GETTY IMAGES [NAMATH, STABLER, UNITAS]; JAMES LANG/USA TODAY SPORTS [MCNAIR]; ROB TRINGALI/SPORTSCHROME/GETTY IMAGES [FAVRE]

THIRD TIME'S A CHARM

After going one-and-done the past two postseasons, Jackson is poised to bring a Super Bowl to Baltimore.

photograph by
KOHJIRO KINNO

FOOTBALL
NFL
2020
PREVIEW

Scouting Re

AFC

EAST		NORTH	
PATRIOTS 3	11–5	RAVENS 2	11–5
BILLS 5	10–6	STEELERS 7	9–7
JETS	7–9	BROWNS	9–7
DOLPHINS	6–10	BENGALS	3–13

WEST		SOUTH	
CHIEFS 1	12–4	COLTS 4	10–6
RAIDERS	9–7	TITANS 6	9–7
CHARGERS	8–8	TEXANS	7–9
BRONCOS	6–10	JAGUARS	2–14

WILD CARD

2 RAVENS *over* STEELERS 7
3 PATRIOTS *over* TITANS 6
5 BILLS *over* COLTS 4

DIVISIONAL ROUND

1 CHIEFS *over* BILLS 5
2 RAVENS *over* PATRIOTS 3

CHAMPIONSHIP GAME

2 RAVENS *over* CHIEFS 1

ports

THE STADIUMS MIGHT LACK FANS, but the NFL is raring to go for what should be season unlike any other—as all 32 teams have their eyes on a February trip to Florida

NFC

EAST		NORTH	
EAGLES 3	11–5	PACKERS 4	9–7
COWBOYS 6	10–6	VIKINGS	8–8
GIANTS	4–12	LIONS	7–9
WASHINGTON	3–13	BEARS	6–10

WEST		SOUTH	
49ERS 2	11–5	SAINTS 1	12–4
RAMS 5	10–6	FALCONS 7	10–6
SEAHAWKS	8–8	BUCCANEERS	9–7
CARDINALS	7–9	PANTHERS	2–14

WILD CARD

2 49ERS *over* FALCONS 7
3 EAGLES *over* COWBOYS 6
5 RAMS *over* PACKERS 4

DIVISIONAL ROUND

1 SAINTS *over* RAMS 5
3 EAGLES *over* 49ERS 2

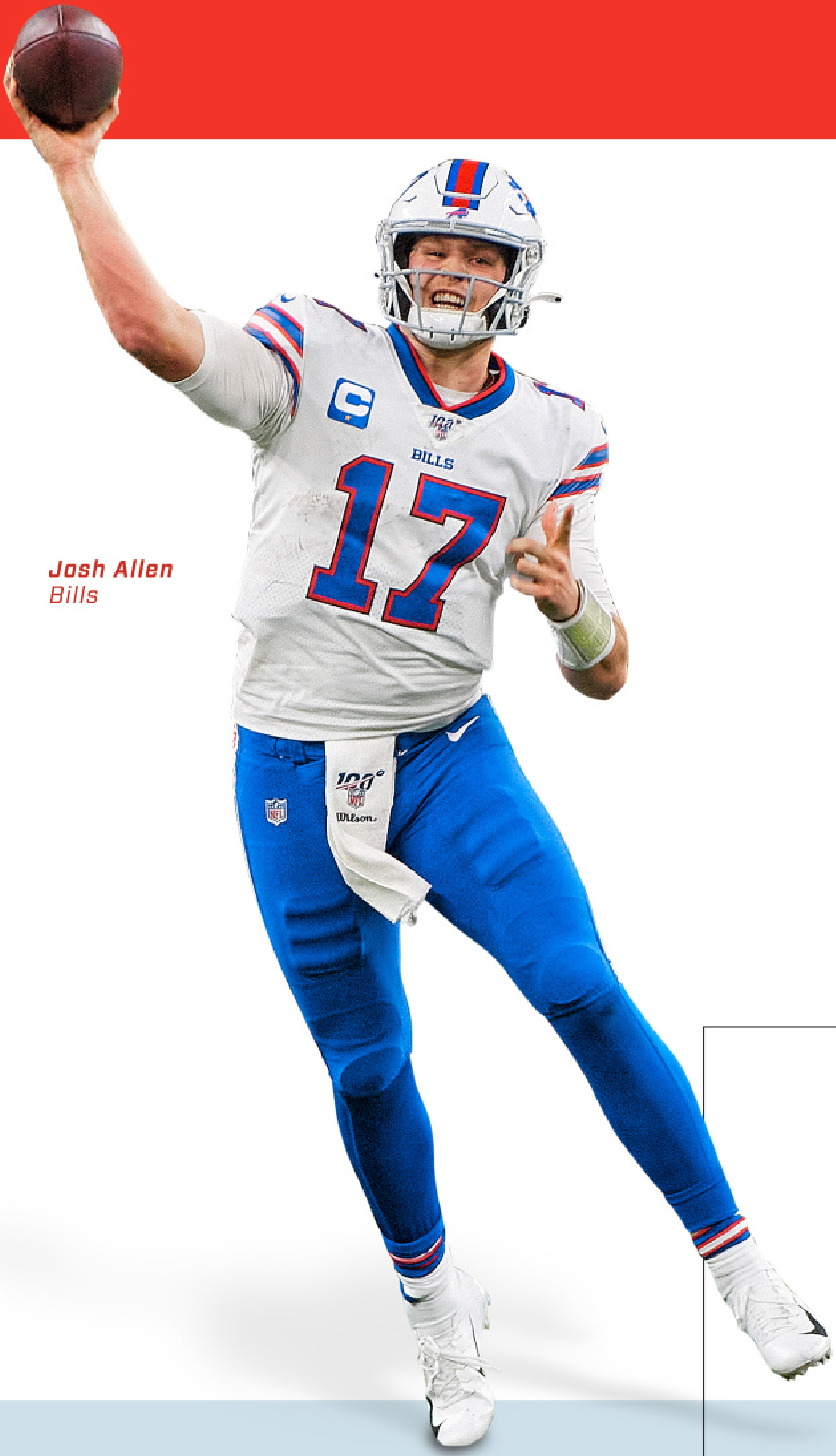
CHAMPIONSHIP GAME

1 SAINTS *over* EAGLES 3

SUPER BOWL LV

Feb. 7, 2021
Raymond James Stadium, Tampa

RAVENS
over
SAINTS



Josh Allen
Bills

EAST

PATS' ANSWER

The signing of Cam Newton should fend off ***SURGING FOES***

by CONOR ORR

▸ **EVERYTHING CHANGED FOR** the AFC East on the night of June 28, when the Patriots signed quarterback Cam Newton.

Before that, the prognosis for the division was, for the first time in almost two decades, uncertain. Maybe this was the year the Jets, who finished 7–9 in 2019 despite a weak offensive line, a less-than-desirable slate of skill position

1 | *NEW ENGLAND* PATRIOTS

PROJECTED 2020 RECORD 11W 5L

BEST CASE: After completing an uneventful, noncompetitive regular season, Cam Newton accelerates into the playoffs with the scariest New England offense in a decade. Opponents focus on the mobile quarterback, which provides a boost to the receiving corps, led by an improved N'Keal Harry, who shows why he was a 2019 first-round pick.

WORST CASE: Newton never fully recovers from offseason Lisfranc surgery, and the Patriots lurch in stops and starts between a creative, Newton-piloted offense and a more traditional system guided by Jarrett Stidham. With all the inconsistency, Josh McDaniels's attack struggles in ways it never did when Tom Brady was under center.

2 | *BUFFALO* BILLS

PROJECTED 2020 RECORD 10W 6L

BEST CASE: Josh Allen grows from being a player who needs to be schemed for to one whose talents dictate the scheme. As he eliminates the disastrous, drive-killing throws and situational inaccuracy that plagued him during his first two seasons, he reminds people of Ben Roethlisberger. The defense, meanwhile, remains as punishing as it was last year.

WORST CASE: Allen flounders, following the Mark Sanchez career curve, which is surprising given that he's being guided by talented coordinator Brian Daboll. The acquisition of WR Stefon Diggs gave this year a boom-or-bust quality, and instead of helping to stretch the field the ex-Viking becomes a symbol of misplaced confidence in Allen.

GREG NELSON

20

NUMBER OF COMBINED PLAYOFF AND REGULAR-SEASON WINS BY WHICH BILL BELICHICK TRAILS ALL-TIME LEADER GEORGE HALAS, MEANING THAT A PERFECT SEASON AND SUPER BOWL VICTORY WOULD PUT BELICHICK ONE SHORT OF THE BEARS LEGEND, AT 323.

SCOUTING REPORTS

SI NFL 20 20

players and a quarterback who missed a quarter of the season with mono, were ready to rise.

Or perhaps the Bills, who made the playoffs last year by scheming around still-developing quarterback Josh Allen and leaning on their deep defense, were poised to take charge.

Or maybe the Dolphins, who under coach Brian Flores swiftly tore down an underperforming roster and rebuilt it from the studs last year, would take command of the post–Tom Brady era behind rookie QB Tua Tagovailoa.

But then Bill Belichick made the power move the rest of the league was both fearing and expecting. He signed Newton, the 2015 MVP and one of the most difficult players to defend in modern league history—and for less than $10 million on a one-season rental. The 31-year-old arrives in New England motivated, after being cut from a Panthers team he brought to the Super Bowl five seasons ago and cold-shouldered by the rest of the league during free agency. And he will, for the first time in his career, be working with an offensive coordinator, Josh McDaniels, who is capable of harnessing Newton's generational combination of power, speed and precision throwing.

So, despite the seismic event of Brady's departure for Tampa Bay, what will keep the Patriots from winning their 12th division title in a row, and their 18th in 20 years?

Much, of course, depends on Newton's health. The quarterback injured his throwing shoulder in 2018 and then missed 14 games last year with a Lisfranc injury that required surgery on his left foot. Those issues help explain why Newton lingered on the market this year. Another wild card is the progress of 2019 fourth-round pick Jarrett Stidham, the apparent Brady successor who saw a critical offseason evaporate at the hands of the COVID-19 pandemic. Belichick's defense will keep the team competitive regardless, but if his offense is clicking, New England will run away from the competition as it has so many times before.

Buffalo still has that tremendous defense. And while the Jets' big news of the offseason was their trade of safety Jamal Adams to Seattle, for a package including two first-round picks, they also remade their offensive line. Both teams have young quarterbacks in a critical phase of development. It is time for Allen and Sam Darnold to fulfill expectations.

Then there's the young quarterback who may be most deserving of attention. Before a right hip dislocation and posterior wall fracture last November for Alabama, Tagovailoa was believed to be a shoo-in for the No. 1 pick. While he fell to fifth, he still has elite potential. If the lefty is ready to get on the field this year and lead the Dolphins and their developing base of talent, then perhaps Miami can finally make the AFC East race interesting. ◻

3

NEW YORK JETS

PROJECTED 2020 RECORD 7W 9L

BEST CASE: The Jets come out of 2020 believing that they have their long-term answers at quarterback (Sam Darnold) and left tackle (Mekhi Becton, their first-round pick from Louisville). Fans may not accept .500 as good news, especially given the polar opinions on coach Adam Gase, but last year he did win seven games with a highly flawed roster.

WORST CASE: The offensive line fixes don't take, and all the inner turmoil reportedly brewing around Gase boils over into a good old-fashioned New York media sideshow. While Gase has ownership's confidence and is tied to new GM Joe Douglas, who recently signed a long-term extension, the ever-reactionary Jets get jumpy as the losses pile up.

4

MIAMI DOLPHINS

PROJECTED 2020 RECORD 6W 10L

BEST CASE: Miami dominates defensively and rides the unpredictable magic of QB Ryan Fitzpatrick to a division title. Yes, these Dolphins have the talent to get hot and shock the field. An entirely different scenario: Tua Tagovailoa takes over for Fitzpatrick at midseason, and Miami's new-look offense immediately puts opponents on their heels.

WORST CASE: The rebuild shows signs of souring early, and ownership pulls the plug too soon on a talented coaching staff. A note to Miami higher-ups: You've succeeded where others have failed by finding a former Patriots assistant, Brian Flores, who can win for you. Don't blow it by firing him and handing back to New England a capable defensive mind.

T.J. Watt
Steelers

NORTH

NOT SO FAST

The Steelers have the ***BEST SHOT*** at slowing down the Ravens' juggernaut

by **CONOR ORR**

▸ **EVERYTHING ABOUT THE** Ravens' 2019 season seemed to augur long-term dominance. A young star emerged at quarterback. A relentless defense developed its identity. An offensive coordinator found his creative groove, pounding team after team into clock-draining submission.

So why would anyone hesitate to hand the division title right back to Baltimore in 2020?

1 | *BALTIMORE* RAVENS

PROJECTED 2020 RECORD 11W 5L

BEST CASE: The Ravens build on their success from 2019 while updating their offense to make it less predictable to opponents who have been studying last season's film. Plenty of teams try to copy the Titans' game plan, built around attackting the line, from their 28–12 playoff upset, but Baltimore's coaching staff stays one step ahead.

WORST CASE: As happened to the Rams last year, a postseason loss provides a successful blueprint for opposing defenses. The offense relies too much on Lamar Jackson's rare escapability, and he wears down. Jackson is a tough runner, but he had such incredible separation that his dashes rarely seemed like a high-wire act. In 2020 they do.

2 | *PITTSBURGH* STEELERS

PROJECTED 2020 RECORD 9W 7L

BEST CASE: A player who missed 2019 due to injury and, before that, mused about retiring, comes back in 2020 rejuvenated and explosive at age 38. Ben Roethlisberger elevates all parts of the offense, including its group of receivers and its relatively inexperienced backfield. New TE Eric Ebron racks up the red zone touchdowns.

WORST CASE: The Steelers' nightmare scenario pretty much happened last year—and thanks to coach Mike Tomlin, they nearly crept into the playoffs anyway. There really is no rock bottom here—unless Roethlisberger shows meaningful signs of decline because, as was evident last year, Pittsburgh does not have a quarterback succession plan in place.

JOE SARGENT/GETTY IMAGES

Maybe it's just the nature of the division itself. The AFC North, especially during the Bengals' more capable years, has usually been a dogfight. The same can be expected this year, except with the more functional Browns replacing Cincinnati while the Bengals are in full rebuild mode, hoping to create something entirely new with coach Zac Taylor and top pick QB Joe Burrow of LSU, instead of running off the fumes of Marvin Lewis–Andy Dalton heyday.

The biggest news is that quarterback Ben Roethlisberger has recovered from his right elbow injury, meaning that a Steelers team that finished 8–8 with his missing 14 games but nearly backed into the playoffs on the strength of a reborn defense, is better positioned to make a run. In Cleveland, Baker Mayfield will have better protection, and more two-tight-end sets will take the pressure off star wideout Odell Beckham Jr. And, while this is no reflection on Lamar Jackson's abilities, it will be extraordinarily difficult for the Ravens' QB to replicate an MVP season in which he rushed for more than 80 yards per game while somehow staying healthy.

It's important not to write off what Baltimore achieved in 2019 as gimmicky, or to classify the 23-year-old Jackson as a one-hit wonder if the Ravens stumble a bit this year. Their 14–2 regular season was the culmination of so many pinpoint decisions made by management, including a keen ability to identify undervalued assets—especially Jackson, snared with the last pick of the first round in 2018, and their cadre of versatile tight ends—and a commitment to building a stifling defense.

3

MORE LOSING SEASONS THAT BILL COWHER HAD IN HIS FIRST 13 YEARS AS STEELERS COACH THAN MIKE TOMLIN, WHO, SINCE TAKING OVER IN 2007, HAS YET TO FINISH WITH A SUB-.500 RECORD.

However, the Steelers bring more than their share of intrigue to the race. Roethlisberger, who got hurt in Week 2, was a top-five QB in both 2017 and '18. Then there's a defense that didn't get the recognition it deserved last year because it was paired with floundering offense, but is full of rising stars such as outside linebacker T.J. Watt and free safety Minkah Fitzpatrick. Watt methodically piled up $14\frac{1}{2}$ sacks last season, logging 59 total pressures and 19 quarterback knockdowns. Fitzpatrick posted an opposing QB rating of 46—that's elite for his position—after coming over from the Dolphins in mid-September, and he also had five interceptions for the Steelers. Pittsburgh finished third in Football Outsiders' defense-adjusted value over average rankings, behind just the 49ers and the Patriots.

It's been difficult to quantify Roethlisberger's value to the good-to-great Steeler teams of recent years, but 2020 provides a wonderful opportunity to do so. He was the one major factor absent last year while Jackson, guided by offensive coordinator Greg Roman, took over the division. What will it mean for the balance of power now that Big Ben is back? ☐

3 *CLEVELAND* BROWNS

PROJECTED 2020 RECORD 9W 7L

BEST CASE: New coach Kevin Stefanski's offense is more streamlined and Baker Mayfield–friendly than Freddie Kitchens's. An improved line gives Mayfield more time in the pocket, and with new TE Austin Hooper working underneath, the field opens up for Odell Beckham Jr., whose performance matches the expectations that greeted his 2019 arrival.

WORST CASE: Cleveland truly is built on some kind of cursed land, and the Browns find new ways to divide and devour themselves. This is the most talented roster Cleveland has seen since its reboot in 1999—more so than last year's version, which was the hot pick of so many pundits— and it would be a shame to see all that talent go to waste.

4 *CINCINNATI* BENGALS

PROJECTED 2020 RECORD 3W 13L

BEST CASE: Forget about the record. The Bengals can come out of this year believing that they have both the coach and QB to move forward comfortably, which is a massive win. Zac Taylor's unimpressive 2019 is understood as a necessary prelude to this year, when he showcases what his offense can do with healthy wideouts and the right quarterback.

WORST CASE: Imagine if by season's end it's clear that Cincinnati hired the wrong Sean McVay disciple as coach last year and then selected the wrong quarterback atop a loaded class in 2020. Joe Burrow will surely be compared with fellow first-rounders Tua Tagovailoa and Justin Herbert for the rest of his career. What if it's not in a good way?

Derrick Henry
Titans

S | O | U | T | H

FUNNY BUNCH

Others are potent, but the Colts have the most potential among ***THIS ODD LOT***

by **CONOR ORR**

▶ **THE STRANGEST DIVISION** in football has spent the last few months getting even stranger. The Texans traded their best player not named Deshaun Watson in the offseason's most second-guessed deal. The Titans backed out of the Tom Brady sweepstakes to focus on building an offense around Derrick Henry and Ryan Tannehill. The Colts handed the reins of

1 | *INDIANAPOLIS* COLTS

PROJECTED 2020 RECORD 10W 6L

BEST CASE: Philip Rivers shows his old spark and performs like a sage game manager, finding young WRs Michael Pittman Jr. and Parris Campbell and giving the Colts an Eagles 2018 vibe, minus the mobility at quarterback. Marlon Mack and second-round rookie Jonathan Taylor from Wisconsin become one of the NFL's top running back tandems.

WORST CASE: Rivers proves to be in the kind of decline that a good scheme cannot reverse, and the offense remains a neutral threat at best while some prime talent goes to waste. The investment in DT DeForest Buckner reaps little. Indianapolis looks back with regret at the spring of 2020, when so many other, younger QBs were on the market.

2 | *TENNESSEE* TITANS

PROJECTED 2020 RECORD 9W 7L

BEST CASE: Offensive coordinator Arthur Smith works wonders once again. Wide receiver A.J. Brown remains white-hot, while workhorse Derrick Henry continues to punish opponents and Ryan Tannehill builds upon his breakout season, earning every dollar of his new contract. Smith is on the wish list of every team needing a coach.

WORST CASE: The toll of last year's heavy workload shows on Henry, whose terribly timed breakdown arrives after the Titans gave him a four-year, $50 million contract extension with $25.5 million guaranteed in July. To spark their run game, the Titans turn to third-rounder Darrynton Evans (Appalachian State), who isn't ready for a feature role.

ERICK W. RASCO

their young offense to a 38-year-old coming off a down season. And the once-promising Jaguars went from chasing a playoff spot to positioning themselves for the No. 1 pick in 2021 draft.

Every team, in some way, seems to be reeling from disappointment. Houston not only blew a 24-point playoff lead to the Chiefs but also a chance to host the AFC championship game. Tennessee, after upending the heavily favored Ravens, fell to Kansas City a week later, allowing coach Mike Vrabel to circumvent any discussion about severing a body part. (Go ahead, look it up.) In Jacksonville, any sense of optimism that remained after a stunning run to the 2017 AFC title game evaporated with so many top players heading for the exits. CB Jalen Ramsey forced a trade in the middle of last season, DE Yannick Ngakoue is trying to do the same this year, and CB A.J. Bouye was allowed to leave for Denver this offseason in free agency.

It is wild to consider that this division was a few plays from having its best two teams face off for the AFC title. And yet none of them, save Indianapolis, felt the need to markedly improve. Is anyone seriously slotting an AFC South team to make the Super Bowl ahead of the Chiefs, Patriots, Ravens or Steelers? Sure, Tennessee signed Tannehill to a four-year, $118 million extension this offseason, but does the idea of him at the helm—no matter how historically efficient he was during the 12 regular-season games he started in 2019—send shivers down opponents' spines? Does a Watson-led offense inspire the same fear when he no longer has DeAndre Hopkins and his insane catch radius to target?

The Colts are the division's most fascinating team this year. While they have all the foundational pieces to make a serious playoff push, the signing of Philip Rivers, after 16 seasons with the Chargers, could be either spectacularly good or irredeemably awful. Frank Reich is one of the best, most adaptable coaches in football, and he spent three years with Rivers in San Diego from 2013 to '15. But can football smarts and a history of shared success stave off Rivers's decline? At a time when mobility has become central to the quarterback position and the development of modern schemes, Rivers is one of the league's remaining throwbacks. He is coming off his worst season, with 20 interceptions and only 23 touchdowns. But he is also only a year removed from ranking among the NFL's three best passers, and at this point he has seen and diagnosed nearly every scheme by every defensive coordinator in football.

You can see what the Colts were thinking when they signed him. Imagine if Rivers regains his form of not-that-long-ago while paired with the budding skill position talent in Indianapolis? Then the strangest division in football may have a surprise for everyone. ◻

1

NUMBER OF TIMES A TEXANS COACH BILL O'BRIEN–COORDINATED OFFENSE HAS FINISHED IN THE TOP 15 IN TOTAL PASSING YARDS (2011, PATRIOTS).

3 | *HOUSTON* TEXANS

PROJECTED 2020 RECORD 7W 9L

BEST CASE: The DeAndre Hopkins trade, like the Jadeveon Clowney deal of 2019, proves to be not as disastrous as the critics thought; the combination of Will Fuller plus newly acquired WRs Brandin Cooks and Randall Cobb keeps the passing game clicking. RB David Johnson, picked up from the Cardinals as part of the Hopkins deal, regains his All-Pro form of 2016.

WORST CASE: As Hopkins thrives in Arizona, the Texans stumble, and Deshaun Watson grows unhappy. It doesn't help that the young players on the offensive line don't show the needed development. The internal divisions deepen in Houston. The disappointing finish doesn't sink coach Bill O'Brien, but as general manager he has to make fixes—quickly.

4 | *JACKSONVILLE* JAGUARS

PROJECTED 2020 RECORD 2W 14L

BEST CASE: Gardner Minshew develops into a reliable quarterback, and WR Laviska Shenault from Colorado proves to be a second-round bargain. Despite only a middling record, the Jaguars emerge from the season feeling good enough about their foundation to spend lavishly on free agents in 2021 and make a run at the division next year.

WORST CASE: RB Leonard Fournette doesn't rally in his contract year, marking another disappointing result from a former first-round pick. After CB Jalen Ramsey stormed his way off the roster during last season, DE Yannick Ngakoue replicates the routine. Coach Doug Marrone can't pull the locker room together and the franchise plunges into turmoil.

W | E | S | T

BET ON RED

The Chiefs could be settling in for a *LENGTHY REIGN*

by CONOR ORR

Patrick Mahomes
Chiefs

▸ **ONCE YOU'VE SUMMITED** the mountain, what comes next?

After the Eagles won the Super Bowl in 2018, they doled out a spate of high-profile extensions, locking up some of the NFL's best players into the early '20s in hopes of a dynastic run. Two years later, the idea that Philadelphia would put a stranglehold on the division (and perhaps

1 | *KANSAS CITY* CHIEFS

PROJECTED 2020 RECORD 12W 4L

BEST CASE: While other teams struggle to get their new players up to speed, Andy Reid, who has 10 offensive starters back, can focus on revving up an attack that was already running in high gear. Rookie Clyde Edwards-Helaire shows why he was the first RB to be drafted, and the gap between the Super Bowl champs and the rest of the league only widens.

WORST CASE: Complacency strikes. Not every 24-point deficit against a quality team is magically transformed into a 20-point lead. Every now and again Reid outsmarts himself rather than the opposition. We are reminded that repeating as champion is tough: The NFL hasn't had back-to-back Super Bowl winners since the Patriots in 2004 and '05.

2 | *LAS VEGAS* RAIDERS

PROJECTED 2020 RECORD 9W 7L

BEST CASE: Jon Gruden finally gets credit for designing clever offensive concepts, and rookie speedster Henry Ruggs hauls in one long touchdown after another. Third-rounders Bryan Edwards (South Carolina) and Lynn Bowden Jr. (Kentucky) also contribute, and as the entire Las Vegas offense opens up, so changes the landscape of the AFC West.

WORST CASE: Gruden is exposed for believing he creates more clever offensive concepts than he actually does. With rookie camps canceled because of the pandemic, it turns out that 2020 was not the ideal year to have five picks in the first three rounds, and the Raiders struggle in their first Las Vegas season to develop the haul they received for Khalil Mack.

JORDAN NAHOLOWAA MURPH

the conference) seems like an obvious stretch.

This offseason the Chiefs engaged in the same type of long-term planning, inking defensive tackle Chris Jones to a four-year, $85 million deal and quarterback Patrick Mahomes to a 10-year contract worth nearly a half-billion dollars. Most of their best players are signed for the foreseeable future, as is 62-year-old coach Andy Reid. The same chorus of *dynasty in the making* that was heard in Philadelphia is echoing in Kansas City, but this time, it seems more believable. At 24, Mahomes is a transcendent talent who is only beginning to develop all the savvy that quarterbacks who don't have his superior arm strength rely on. Reid's catalog of play calls gets only deeper and deeper, and his designs are simultaneously a chart for the league's future and an encyclopedia of its past. One can only imagine what designs Reid will conjure for his newest weapon, first-round pick Clyde Edwards-Helaire; the versatile 5' 7", 207-pound running back had 1,414 rushing yards and caught 55 passes last year at LSU.

The NFL changes quickly, of course. At this time last year, few believed anyone in the NFC West could challenge wunderkind Sean McVay's Rams. Then the 49ers surged, the Cardinals developed a terrifying arsenal of playmakers, the Seahawks found a spark on defense and the 2018 NFC champs receded into the pack.

Now, can anyone in the AFC West overtake K.C.? There is no obvious candidate. The Raiders, who will be leaving Oakland to play their first season in Las Vegas, have done an impressive job at overhauling a roster (though some didn't think it need to be overhauled in the first place). Still, their collection of young talent, including first-round pick WR Henry Ruggs from Alabama, second-year RB Josh Jacobs and 2019 breakout TE Darren Waller, plus the continued maturation of QB Derek Carr, makes them potentially formidable. The Chargers are beginning a rebuild after their quarterback of 16 seasons, Philip Rivers, left for Indianapolis, and they will likely spend the season transitioning from veteran QB Tyrod Taylor to rookie Justin Herbert, the sixth pick from Oregon. The Broncos and second-year quarterback Drew Lock present the widest range of possibilities. Lock played well down the stretch as a rookie in 2019, going 4–1 as a starter while completing 64.1% of his passes. But this offseason the team puzzlingly parted ways with talented offensive coordinator Rich Scangarello in favor of former Giants coach Pat Shurmur.

Most likely, the Chiefs will be ruling this roost for a while. Having one team dominate for a long stretch can be a frustrating proposition, as the non-Patriots fans of the AFC East can attest. But at least we know that with the creativity of Reid and the charisma of Mahomes, Kansas City will be fun to watch. □

6

DEREK CARR'S RANKING IN DEFENSIVE YARDS ABOVE REPLACEMENT, A FOOTBALL OUTSIDERS MEASURE THAT SLOTS HIM JUST BEHIND LAMAR JACKSON.

3 | LOS ANGELES CHARGERS

PROJECTED 2020 RECORD 8W 8L

BEST CASE: Rookie QB Justin Herbert doesn't see the field at all in 2020, and that's fine, because coach Anthony Lynn's faith in Tyrod Taylor is rewarded with a surprise playoff berth. The pair formed a strong bond in Buffalo, and Lynn's belief in Taylor, who hadn't started since Week 3 of 2018, is rewarded. Tight end Hunter Henry plays all 16 games for the first time in his career.

WORST CASE: After Taylor falters, Herbert is thrust into action early and struggles, setting back his long-term development. The hasty turn to Herbert also consumes time that could have been spent expanding the offense and wastes part of the prime of WR Keenan Allen. Departed RB Melvin Gordon is missed as a complement to Austin Ekeler.

4 | DENVER BRONCOS

PROJECTED 2020 RECORD 6W 10L

BEST CASE: All the Denver fans excited by Drew Lock's solid end-of-2019 play have their optimism justified. With rookie receivers Jerry Jeudy (Alabama) and KJ Hamler (Penn State) joining WR Courtland Sutton and TE Noah Fant, Lock leads an electric passing game, while free-agent signee Melvin Gordon joins Philip Lindsay to form a potent ground tandem.

WORST CASE: Lock regresses under new coordinator Pat Shurmur. Despite the addition of Gordon, the ground game is not enough to sustain the offense with the air attack faltering. LB Von Miller, whose sack total dipped to eight in 2019, declines further in his 10th NFL season. GM John Elway decides it is time for another hard reset in Denver.

Amari Cooper
Cowboys

E | A | S | T

HIGH PAIR

Expect another **TWO-TEAM RACE**, but with both contender looking stronger

by **GARY GRAMLING**

▸ **THE NFL IS** rife with parity. The NFC East is not. No other division has such a stark contrast between the haves and have-nots: The Eagles and Cowboys enter the year with Super Bowl aspirations, while the Giants and Washington remain in rebuild mode.

But while this season will repeat last year's two-team race, neither Philadelphia nor Dallas

1 | PHILADELPHIA EAGLES

PROJECTED 2020 RECORD 11W 5L

BEST CASE: All the additions at receiver rejuvenate the downfield passing game, Jason Peters proves a suitable replacement for injured RG Brandon Brooks and Carson Wentz turns in an MVP-caliber season. Darius Slay shuts down opponents' No. 1 receivers while another free-agent addition, DT Javon Hargrave, adds juice to the front four.

WORST CASE: The injury bug strikes again. Wentz goes down as he did in 2017 and '18, and second-round selection Jalen Hurts isn't ready for prime time. The pass rush—especially DE Brandon Graham, 32, and DT Fletcher Cox, 29—shows its age, and a blitz-heavy scheme allows too many big plays. In the competitive NFC, Philly just misses the playoffs.

2 | DALLAS COWBOYS

PROJECTED 2020 RECORD 10W 6L

BEST CASE: With the addition of rookie CeeDee Lamb and the emergence of a healthy (and consistent) Amari Cooper plus the continued development of third-year pro Michael Gallup, Dak Prescott delivers MVP-level numbers. Players adapt quickly to the system of new DC Mike Nolan, who is able to generate a pass rush through his creative blitz packages.

WORST CASE: The offense once again puts up gaudy stats but (also once again) shrinks at the biggest moments. While end Demarcus Lawrence continues to dominate, the changes on a defense that is also replacing key starters are too much to handle, especially with the truncated offseason. Mike McCarthy finds himself on the hot seat after his first season.

KEVIN JAIRAJ/USA TODAY SPORTS

will again be hovering around the .500 mark in late December. The Eagles limped through the second half of 2019 as Carson Wentz carried an injury-riddled receiving corps that was, if not the league's worst, at least its slowest. But this year Philly will have a veritable 4x100 relay of new receivers, after drafting speedsters Jalen Reagor of TCU (first round) and John Hightower of Boise State (fifth) while acquiring sprinter and 2012 Olympic long jumper Marquise Goodwin from the 49ers and getting back a healthy DeSean Jackson. Meanwhile, the defense has a new No. 1 cornerback in free agent Darius Slay, who will look even better in Philadelphia than he did behind the Lions' nonexistent pass rush.

In Dallas, Mike McCarthy takes over as coach after another season under Jason Garrett in which the record (8-8) was less than the sum of the team's parts. McCarthy will lean on offensive coordinator Kellen Moore, a holdover from Garrett's staff, to get another big year out of quarterback Dak Prescott. The receiving corps should be even stronger, with first-round pick CeeDee Lamb of Oklahoma joining 1,000-yard receivers Amari Cooper and Michael Gallup. Cooper, who had big numbers but watched from the sideline as the final drive in a must-win game at Philadelphia came up short, must assert himself more. But throw in RB Ezekiel Elliott and a line strong enough to withstand the retirement of center Travis Frederick, and the offense should be one of the NFL's best. The defense, though, will have to weather a major transition. McCarthy brought in veteran coach Mike Nolan, whose schemes are notably complex, to run a unit that lost top cornerback Byron Jones and pass rusher Robert Quinn in free agency.

As for the also-rans, both have new coaches—Bill Belichick disciple Joe Judge in New York and longtime Panthers coach Ron Rivera in Washington—and second-year quarterbacks. Daniel Jones is ahead of fellow 2019 first-round pick Dwayne Haskins in Washington, and the new Giants offensive coordinator, ex-Cowboys coach Garrett, will take over his development. New York's continued investment in the offensive line (including the fourth pick, tackle Andrew Thomas from Georgia) and the presence of RB Saquon Barkley means the Giants should score. But Jones's tendency to get stripped in the pocket, plus a defense that lacks identity, caps their upside.

In Washington, a green Haskins and a shortage of passing-game weapons means that the offense will rely on a rushing attack led by Adrian Peterson and Derrius Guice. Defensive end Chase Young, the No. 2 overall pick from Ohio State, adds to an already potent pass rush, but the team has questions at linebacker and in the secondary. When Washington does win, it will win ugly.

1

COMBINED CAREER POSTSEASON VICTORIES FOR THE DIVISION'S FOUR PROJECTED STARTING QBS (DAK PRESCOTT IN THE 2018 WILD-CARD ROUND).

3 *NEW YORK* GIANTS

PROJECTED 2020 RECORD 4W 12L

BEST CASE: Daniel Jones takes the next step in his sophomore season under new coordinator Jason Garrett, and a balanced and efficient offense takes some of the heat off the defense. Meanwhile, a smoke-and-mirrors approach by that D allows them to overachieve, making the Giants a tough out. They fall short of the playoffs but show promise.

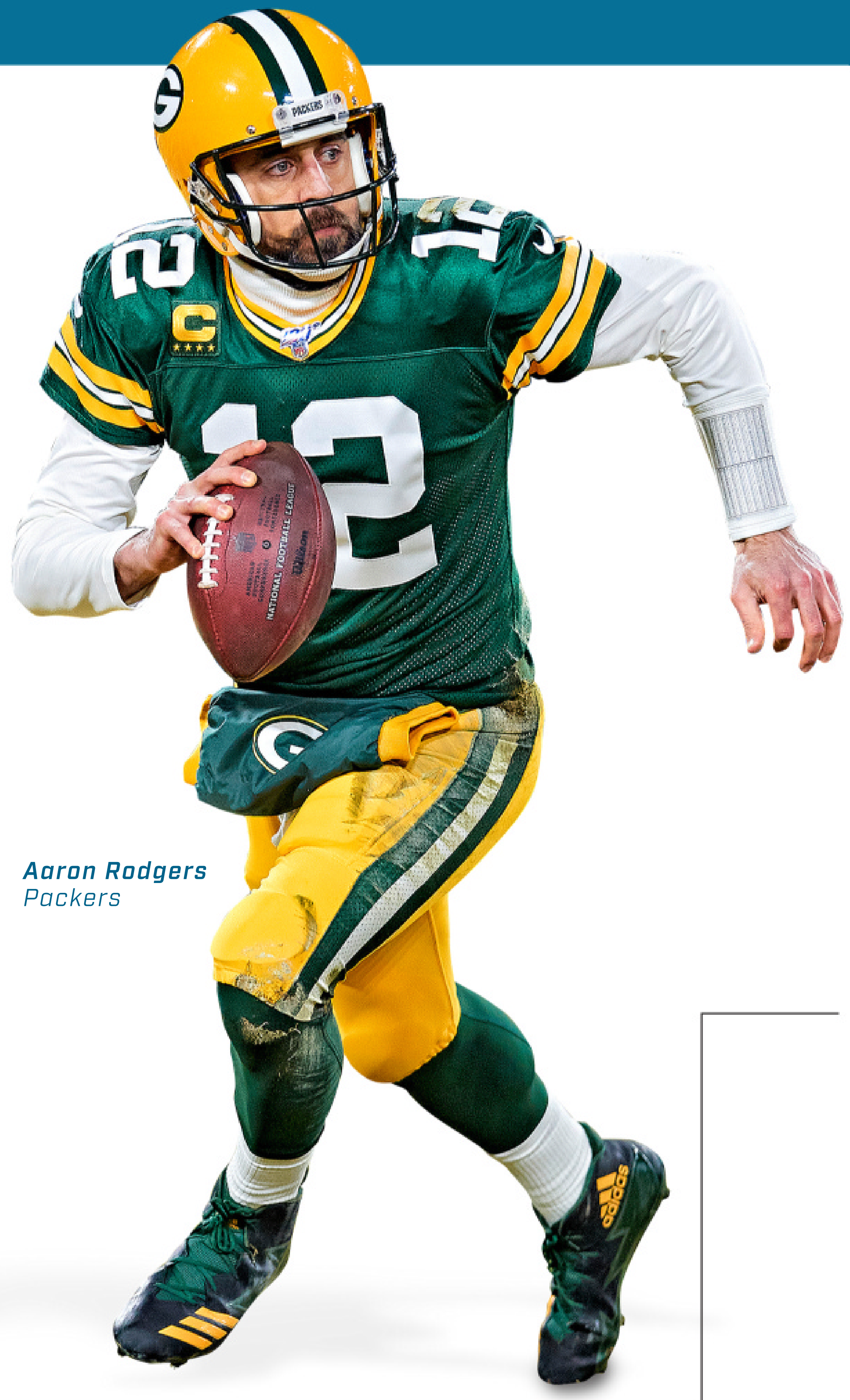
WORST CASE: Jones, who had 18 fumbles in 13 games last season breaks the NFL record of 23 this year. The turnover margin is too much to overcome for a team whose offense lacks big-play weapons at receiver and whose defense that struggles to get stops. GM Dave Gettleman's seat is scorching, and even rookie head coach Joe Judge isn't safe.

4 WASHINGTON

PROJECTED 2020 RECORD 3W 13L

BEST CASE: New coach Ron Rivera brings the franchise a needed sense of stability, and Chase Young turns in a Defensive Player of the Year–type season as a rookie, as the line covers up for a shaky cornerbacking group. Derrius Guice finally stays healthy and leads a ball-control offense that protects Dwayne Haskins and keeps opposing offenses off the field.

WORST CASE: Washington's offense ranks in the bottom five of every major category. The defense has its moments, but with too many holes of its own, it is not strong enough to carry the team. Washington decides to scrap its latest QB plan and start anew (again), but doesn't lose enough games to position itself for the QB gems of the 2021 draft class.



Aaron Rodgers
Packers

N | O | R | T | H

NO ONE'S PERFECT

A once-promising division now offers up *HEAVILY FLAWED* contenders

by GARY GRAMLING

▸ **LAST YEAR THE** NFC North looked as if it could be the class of the NFL. All it needed was for Bears quarterback Mitchell Trubisky to break out, Aaron Rodgers to be rejuvenated under his new coach in Green Bay, the Vikings to continue dominating on defense and coach Matt Patricia to successfully implement the Patriot Way in Detroit.

1 | *GREEN BAY* PACKERS

PROJECTED 2020 RECORD 9W 7L

BEST CASE: The offseason drama is much ado about nothing, as Aaron Rodgers executes Matt LaFleur's offense to near-perfection, and RBs Aaron Jones and AJ Dillon running wild. Behind its young secondary, the defense is one of the league's five best. The Packers don't equal their 13 wins of 2019, but they are better equipped come January.

WORST CASE: Rodgers bristles all season, both because of his continued discomfort with LaFleur's heavily schemed offense and his lack of pass-catching weapons. The defense's putrid performance last January proves to be a harbinger. The offseason talking points focus on whom the Packers would be better off without, the coach or the quarterback.

2 | *MINNESOTA* VIKINGS

PROJECTED 2020 RECORD 8W 8L

BEST CASE: Mike Zimmer turns in his finest coaching performance, getting immediate results out of a revamped secondary while the offense continues to be efficient and opportunistic. Questions about Kirk Cousins's ability to win the big games disappear, as he engineers multiple fourth-quarter comebacks to squeeze out a division title.

WORST CASE: The massive turnover in personnel proves to be too much to handle in a shortened offseason, and the defense regresses, especially in its revamped secondary. Cousins can't carry the load, and Minnesota is one of 2020's most maddeningly inconsistent teams. By December, the Vikings are reframing this lost season as a rebuilding year.

JEFF HAYNES

Instead we have this. Start with the Packers, who are experiencing the kind of chaos you rarely see from a team coming off a 13-win season and conference title game appearance. You have to go back to before Brett Favre took over in 1992 to find this much uncertainty about the offense, especially after the team spent its first-round pick on Utah State QB Jordan Love rather than find more help downfield for Rodgers. Perhaps more telling, in the second round Green Bay took Boston College back AJ Dillon, a 250-pound hammer with open-field speed reminiscent of the Titans' Derrick Henry. It looks as if coach Matt LaFleur is aiming to make the Pack more like his former team in Tennessee, built around wide-zone runs and play-action.

Minnesota has no questions at quarterback after Kirk Cousins signed an extension that locks him in for at least two more seasons. But Cousins has always been more of a role player on a team built around its defense. That unit, however, underwent more turnover than perhaps any in football this offseason. Gone are Pro Bowl linemen Everson Griffen (10 seasons in Minnesota) and Linval Joseph (six), as well as three of the team's top four cornerbacks, including mainstays Xavier Rhodes (seven seasons with the Vikings) and Trae Waynes (five). Coach Mike Zimmer has been historically loath to rely on rookies in the secondary, but first-rounder Jeff Gladney (TCU) and third-rounder Cameron Dantzler (Mississippi State) may have to play big roles immediately. While Minnesota brings back several stars—linebackers Eric Kendricks and Anthony Barr, edge rusher Danielle Hunter and safeties Harrison Smith and Anthony Harris—the defense will remain solid only if the secondary meshes quickly.

The Bears have few questions on defense, especially with free-agent acquisition Robert Quinn providing a pass-rush bookend for Khalil Mack. But they have many issues on offense, starting with Trubisky. His sharp regression in 2019 impelled Chicago to bring in Nick Foles, a high-priced free-agent bust in Jacksonville. Foles does have a Super Bowl pedigree and knows coach Matt Nagy's system from their time in Kansas City, but both QBs lack the support they need; Chicago's only strong pass catcher is Allen Robinson, and its rushing attack is hopeless.

In a wide-open division, Detroit could make a run, theoretically. Before his season-ending back injury midway through 2019, Matthew Stafford was playing at an MVP level. (No one noticed because the defense was flailing.) With the 32-year-old Stafford back, Patricia's D must deliver. Last year the pass rush was toothless, and that placed an unreasonable burden on the secondary. New corners Jeff Okudah, the No. 3 pick from Ohio State, and former Falcons star Desmond Trufant, plus a rotation of young safeties, will have their work cut out for them. ☐

2

TIMES AN NFC NORTH TEAM HAS GONE 6–0 WITHIN THE DIVISION SINCE ITS INCEPTION IN 2002; GREEN BAY DID IT IN 2011 AND AGAIN LAST YEAR.

3 DETROIT LIONS

PROJECTED 2020 RECORD 7W 9L

BEST CASE: With Matthew Stafford picking up at the elite level he left off at before last year's back injury, and the defense improving as Matt Patricia gets more of his hand-selected pieces in the lineup, the Lions break through. They go 6–2 at Ford Field and consistently hang around on the road, pulling off enough miracles for 10 wins and a division title.

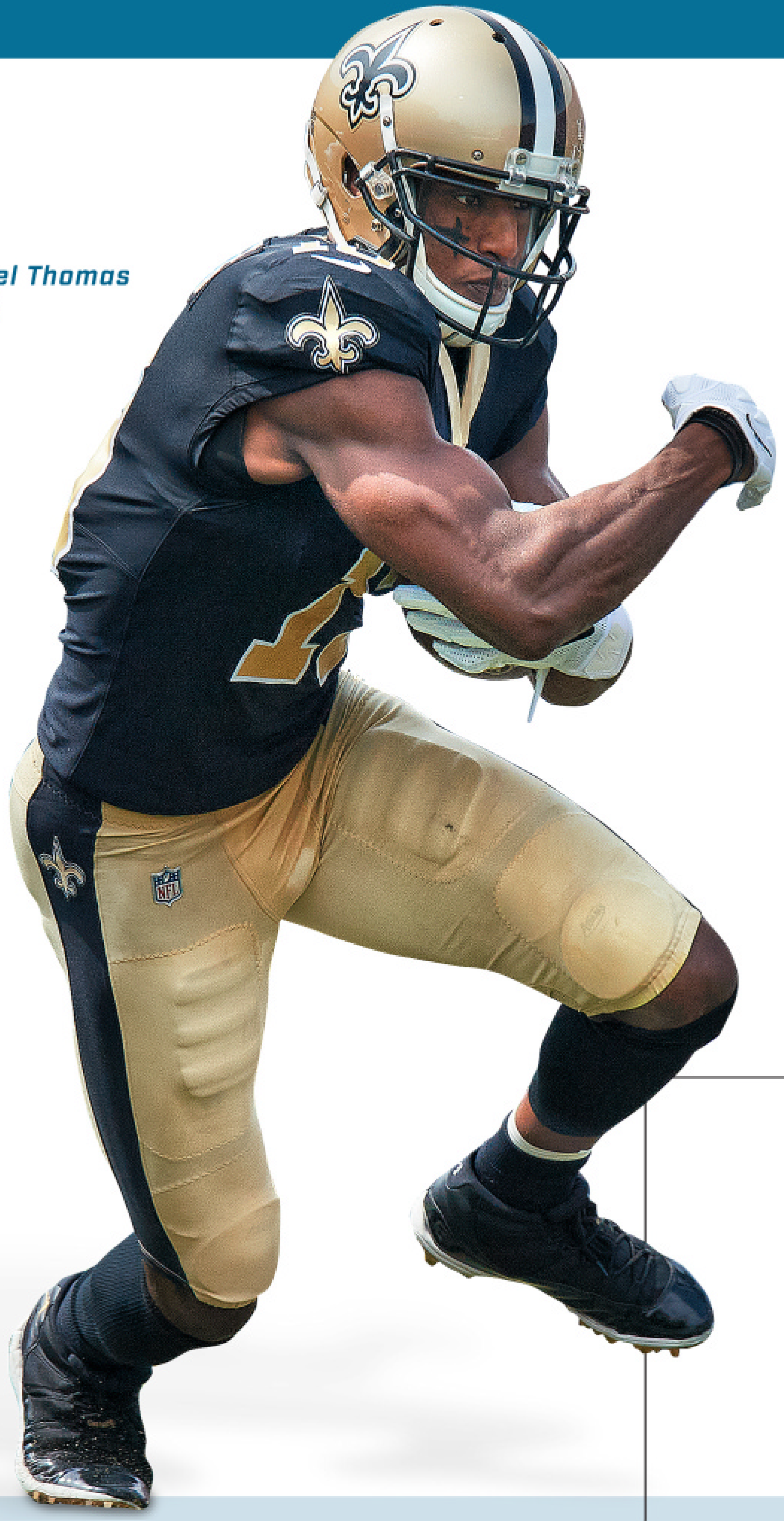
WORST CASE: Stafford can do only so much, especially in front of a revamped offensive line. The pass rush once again finishes in the bottom five in sacks, and that puts far too much stress on the young secondary, even though rookie CB Jeff Okudah is outstanding. GM Bob Quinn and Patricia are gone well before Black Monday rolls around.

4 CHICAGO BEARS

PROJECTED 2020 RECORD 6W 10L

BEST CASE: Either Mitch Trubisky or Nick Foles are serviceable at quarterback, but it's the surprising ground attack, led by David Montgomery and Tarik Cohen, that makes the offense go. Khalil Mack and Robert Quinn become football's best pass-rush duo, and the defense piles up 30-plus takeaways, bringing back memories of its 2018 dominance.

WORST CASE: Coach Matt Nagy can't make his offense go with either of his quarterbacks, as he shifts between the skittish Trubisky and the turnover-prone Foles. The rushing attack again finishes in the bottom 10. The defense is sturdy, but the turnovers fail to materialize for a second straight year, and 21–10 becomes a typical losing score in Chicago.



Michael Thomas
Saints

SOUTH

POWER HOUSE

What stands in the way of Tom Brady and Tampa Bay? *PLENTY*

by **GARY GRAMLING**

▶ **THE BUCCANEERS' FREE-AGENT** signing of Tom Brady is the biggest in NFL history. His 20-year first act in New England included six Super Bowl wins and 11 consecutive AFC East titles. Now he joins a franchise whose most recent playoff appearance was during the George W. Bush administration, and whose last postseason victory was Super Bowl XXXVII, in

1 | *NEW ORLEANS* SAINTS | PROJECTED 2020 RECORD 12W 4L

BEST CASE: Continuity and pure talent work in the Saints' favor as they dominate the division for a fourth straight season and seize the NFC's top seed. WR Emmanuel Sanders proves to be a nice addition, and getting the conference's lone postseason bye proves keeps Drew Brees fresh for a deep playoff run. New Orleans ends up going 10–0 at the Superdome.

WORST CASE: The window of opportunity slams shut when the Saints least expected it, as the arm strength of Brees, now in his 20th season, sinks to 2015 Peyton Manning levels. The defense holds up, but after struggling to claim the seventh and final playoff seed, New Orleans is knocked out quickly, a one-and-done for a second consecutive January.

2 | *ATLANTA* FALCONS | PROJECTED 2020 RECORD 10W 6L

BEST CASE: The Falcons pick up where they left off in 2019, starting 7–2 before facing the Saints or Bucs. The offense hums, with RB Todd Gurley regaining All-Pro form and Laquon Treadwell looking more like a first-round pick than he did in Minnesota. But it's the defense, with free-agent signee Dante Fowler rushing off the edge, that propels Atlanta into the playoffs.

WORST CASE: Last year's second half proves to be a mirage, and the inexplicable struggles at home (12–12 at Mercedes-Benz Stadium since it opened) continue. The Falcons wobble through the early part of their schedule before getting pummeled down the stretch, when they play New Orleans and Tampa Bay twice and travel to Kansas City.

JOHN W. MCDONOUGH

January 2003. Can he single-handedly reverse Tampa Bay's fortunes?

Brady has said that he will run Bruce Arians's offense, rather than ask the coach to change his system. This is a big adjustment for the 43-year-old. In New England he often made quick-strike throws, but Arians prefers to get the ball downfield, which will expose Brady to the pass rush. Offensive line play will be critical, and the Bucs upgraded their inconsistent but talented unit by drafting OT Tristan Wirfs from Iowa in the first round. One plus: Tampa Bay's receivers far exceed what the Patriots had in 2019. Mike Evans and Chris Godwin are All-Pro-caliber, and, oh yes, Rob Gronkowski has come out of retirement to join an already deep group of tight ends.

Tampa Bay's biggest roadblock to a division title is the Saints, who are coming off back-to-back 13-win seasons and have the most complete team in the division. Drew Brees has mastered their ball-control passing game, and last year WR Michael Thomas racked up an NFL-record 149 catches despite intense coverage. The availability of RB Alvin Kamara, who was slowed by ankle and knee injuries last year, will make the New Orleans offense even more dangerous; coach Sean Payton likes to align Thomas and Kamara on the same side of the formation to prevent defenses from doubling one of them. The Saints addressed a weakness in the secondary by bringing in safety Malcolm Jenkins, and cornerback Janoris Jenkins, a midseason pickup last year, will have had time to adapt.

.658

COMBINED CAREER REGULAR-SEASON WINNING PERCENTAGE, AS STARTERS, BY PROJECTED STARTING QBS TOM BRADY (.774), TEDDY BRIDGEWATER (.647), DREW BREES (.595) AND MATT RYAN (.577).

Could the Falcons be New Orleans's most dangerous challenger? Last year Atlanta rallied for a 6–2 finish after a 1–7 start, saving coach Dan Quinn's job. That run was fueled by a stunning turnaround on defense: After allowing an average of 31.3 points over the season's first eight games, the Falcons gave up just 18.6 over the final eight. The offense has the pedigree for a big year—all 11 projected starters (including new RB Todd Gurley) were first-round picks.

The Panthers pulled the plug on the most successful era of their franchise. Gone are former MVP Cam Newton (released and signed by the Patriots), two-time Coach of the Year Ron Rivera (fired, hired by Washington) and two-time Defensive Player of the Year Luke Kuechly (retired). New coach Matt Rhule must make the leap to the NFL after running successful reclamation projects at Temple and Baylor. Free-agent QB Teddy Bridgewater rekindles his relationship with first-year offensive coordinator Joe Brady, LSU's play-caller last year and an assistant with the Saints the year before that. The attack will still revolve around RB Christian McCaffrey, who had 2,392 total yards and accounted for 43.8% of his team's offense, the most in the NFL. The question is what the defense will look like after Carolina spent all seven of its 2020 draft picks on that side of the ball. ▫

3 | *TAMPA BAY* BUCCANEERS

PROJECTED 2020 RECORD 9W 7L

BEST CASE: All the shaming over his pandemic workouts was worth it for Tom Brady; the new-look Bucs hit the ground running in September. He thrives with weapons he could only dream of last year, showing off his still-impressive arm with deep shots, made possible by a line that gives him plenty of time. Tampa Bay captures its first division title since 2007.

WORST CASE: The pandemic makes it hard for Brady to acclimate, and the offense never coheres. Brady's frustrated body language becomes a topic of conversation (and, to many, source of joy) around the league, while Gronk talks about retiring again. Not even a soft late-season schedule keeps Brady from watching the playoffs on TV.

4 | *CAROLINA* PANTHERS

PROJECTED 2020 RECORD 2W 14L

BEST CASE: No one knows what to expect from a franchise that has been rebuilt from top to bottom, and that unpredictability plays in the Panthers' favor all year long as they prove to be a stubborn out. OC Joe Brady is hotly pursued after working his magic with Teddy Bridgewater, while new coach Matt Rhule's retooled and rookie-laden defense shows future promise.

WORST CASE: Carolina just doesn't have the horses to compete, especially in a division this stacked, and Bridgewater can do only so much. After not drafting an offensive player last spring, the team prepares to—silver lining alert!—draft a franchise quarterback with the No. 1 pick, choosing between Clemson's Trevor Lawrence and Ohio State's Justin Fields.

Nick Bosa
49ers

W | E | S | T

FIERY FIGHT

A warning to the conference champs: *EVERY TEAM* here can contend

by GARY GRAMLING

▸ **YOU COULD ARGUE** that the NFC West is football's best division. It includes the conference's past two champions, San Francisco and L.A. Seattle is led by an MVP front-runner in Russell Wilson, who has already won a ring, and Arizona has the reigning Offensive Rookie of the Year, QB Kyler Murray. Having to gain separation from these foes will make the climb back to

1 | *SAN FRANCISCO* 49ERS

PROJECTED 2020 RECORD 11W 5L

BEST CASE: Kyle Shanahan continues to be the NFL's best play-caller, RB Jerick McKinnon finally gets on the field, and Jimmy Garoppolo is sharper in his second season back from a torn ACL. Defensive coordinator Robert Saleh once again oversees a dominating unit that loads up on takeaways; after the season he takes over as Jaguars coach.

WORST CASE: Injuries test the team's depth, and age catches up to CB Richard Sherman and LT Trent Williams, both 32. Garoppolo underwhelms again, and with the Rams revived, Russell Wilson magical and a rising Cardinals team in the division, the Niners become the fourth NFC champion in five years to miss the playoffs the following season.

2 | *LOS ANGELES* RAMS

PROJECTED 2020 RECORD 10W 6L

BEST CASE: All the Rams needed was some stability on the offensive line. Jared Goff picks up where he left off last December, second-round rookie RB Cam Akers (Florida State) fills in ably for the departed Todd Gurley and a steadier kicker flips a couple of close games. Sean McVay regains golden boy status as the Rams christen SoFi Stadium in style.

WORST CASE: Goff has another up-and-down season at quarterback despite McVay's play-calling wizardry. The bigger problem: a defense that changed coordinators and is relying on a new group of linebackers. Not even tackle Aaron Donald and cornerback Jalen Ramsey can keep L.A.'s defense from being picked apart, especially by its division foes.

JOHN W. MCDONOUGH

the Super Bowl all the more steep for the 49ers.

A pessimist could point out that San Francisco depended on narrow escapes last season, with five of its wins by five points or fewer. But an optimist would counter that the team's four losses included a three-pointer in Baltimore, an overtime defeat to Seattle that could have been avoided if a rookie kicker had made a 47-yard field goal and their 31–20 Super Bowl loss to the Chiefs. This team is talented, tested and impeccably coached by Kyle Shanahan. Their defense, led by second-year end Nick Bosa, will only get better. But the major question is QB Jimmy Garoppolo, who struggled with ball placement last year and shrunk in the second half against Kansas City. While his struggles might have been due to his recovery from a torn ACL in 2018, the Niners need him to play like a franchise quarterback.

The Rams would have made the postseason last year under 2020's new 14-team playoff (or if Greg Zuerlein had connected on a late 44-yarder in a Week 5 loss at Seattle). But while their NFC title defense fell flat, the year wasn't a total loss. A young offensive line came into its own later on and, after a shaky first two thirds of the season, Jared Goff and Sean McVay found their groove, averaging 29.0 points over the final five games. The departure of hobbled running back Todd Gurley won't hurt, though some changeover on defense might. First-year coordinator Brandon Staley has elite stars in tackle Aaron Donald and cornerback Jalen Ramsey, but his linebacking corps is unproven.

Meanwhile, Seattle keeps finding ways to win. Two years ago they returned to a run-heavy offense with QB Russell Wilson sprinkling in big throws off play-action. They don't pile up points, but that formula allows them to hang around every week, and last season they went 11–3 in one-possession games. While the Seahawks acquired star safety Jamal Adams from the Jets, they didn't address their lack of traditional pass rushers. Turnovers are typically created by pressure; that's why it's hard to envision Seattle duplicating last year's 32 takeaways (third most in the league). Sixteen of those were fumble recoveries over the season's first 12 games. Then Seattle failed to get a single fumble takeaway over the final six (including playoffs), when they went 2–4 (the wins coming over the hapless Panthers and the Josh McCown–led Eagles).

The Cardinals are a popular breakout candidate, with Kyler Murray coming off an impressive rookie year in Kliff Kingsbury's Air Raid offense. Murray's biggest flaw was on intermediate passes: He had a league-low 47.2 completion percentage on throws that traveled 11 to 20 yards. Did his height (5' 10") limit his ability to see downfield, or were his receivers not open? If it was the latter, the acquisition of All-Pro DeAndre Hopkins from the Texans will serve as an instant remedy. ☐

1

REPEAT NFC TITLISTS SINCE THE START OF THE MILLENNIUM (THE 2014 SEAHAWKS).

3 SEATTLE SEAHAWKS

PROJECTED 2020 RECORD 8W 8L

BEST CASE: When you have Russell Wilson, LB Bobby Wagner and coach Pete Carroll, you're always in the hunt. The running game keeps the chains moving, and the Seahawks continue their charmed run in close games. But what lifts them into title contention is the pass rush, sparked by 2019 first-round pick L.J. Collier, whose rookie season was marred by an ankle injury.

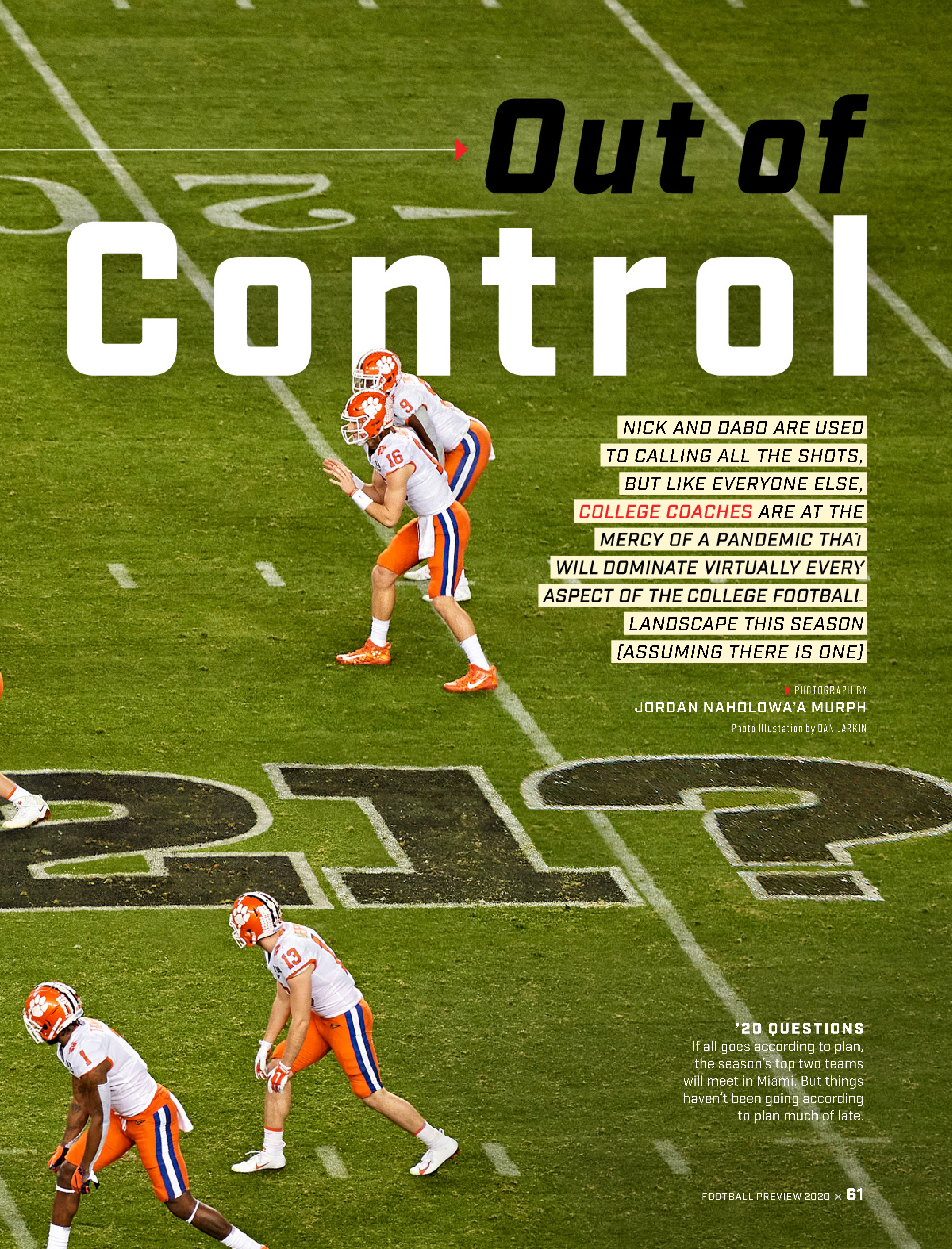
WORST CASE: The one-score games that Seattle won so often last year go the other way, and, without as many recovered fumbles bouncing their way as happened in 2019, not even newly acquired stud safety Jamal Adams can keep the defense from having a disappointing year. It all adds up to the first sub-.500 season of the Wilson era.

4 ARIZONA CARDINALS

PROJECTED 2020 RECORD 7W 9L

BEST CASE: New arrival DeAndre Hopkins gives Kyler Murray the intermediate-level threat he lacked as a rookie, and Arizona's young receivers take a step forward. On defense the smoke-and-mirrors approach works to perfection. Murray ascends to dark-horse MVP candidate status, and Kliff Kingsbury earns Coach of the Year honors.

WORST CASE: The defense, which ranked last in the NFL in 2019, again struggles to make stops. On offense, the shortened offseason prevents Murray and Hopkins from creating the necessary chemistry to thrive. The tight end position remains unproductive. The QB again takes 40-plus sacks as pundits wonder whether Kingsbury's offense is fit for the NFL.



Out of Control

NICK AND DABO ARE USED TO CALLING ALL THE SHOTS, BUT LIKE EVERYONE ELSE, COLLEGE COACHES ARE AT THE MERCY OF A PANDEMIC THAT WILL DOMINATE VIRTUALLY EVERY ASPECT OF THE COLLEGE FOOTBALL LANDSCAPE THIS SEASON (ASSUMING THERE IS ONE)

PHOTOGRAPH BY
JORDAN NAHOLOWA'A MURPH
Photo Illustation by DAN LARKIN

'20 QUESTIONS
If all goes according to plan, the season's top two teams will meet in Miami. But things haven't been going according to plan much of late.

BY **PAT FORDE**

IT HAS, BY ANY MEASURE, BEEN A LOUSY YEAR FOR CONTROL FREAKS.

Daily life has teetered between unpredictable and unmanageable. Routines have been rendered moot. Planning is for suckers. You are not in charge. I am not in charge. To our considerable collective detriment, nobody seems to be in charge.

This sudden-onset anomie cuts across all walks of life. But if any subset of control freaks has had their world rocked the most in 2020, it might be college football coaches. They've had their iron-fist authority challenged from all directions.

Even more than their NFL counterparts, they are accustomed to getting their way. (The successful ones, at least.) Often the highest-paid employees at their schools, if not their states, escorted by law enforcement on game day, private jets available on demand, facilities and staffs built and expanded to suit their every need, complete roster control, fans who fawn over them, players who are enculturated to revere them—the best college football coaches have this thing wired.

Or did.

A virus has reduced their importance, dropping them lower in the social hierarchy than public health experts, elected officials and the university presidents who might ordinarily cowtow to them. The virus is calling the shots, and the people crafting policy in response to the ongoing pandemic suddenly outrank the feudal lords of football. Their seasons, often elevated in importance to something just barely below life and death, are now disposable.

This would come as a shock to Bear Bryant, if he were alive to see it. He didn't think his Texas A&M players deserved water while practicing all day in 100-degree heat in Junction, Texas, in 1954. Stop playing because of a virus? What kind of candy-apple world are we living in?

It would also come as a shock to Dabo Swinney, who is alive to see it. "God can stamp this out just as quick as it rose up," the Clemson coach said in April. In late July, his school announced that the fall semester will begin online. God is apparently working on a different timeline than the coach hoped.

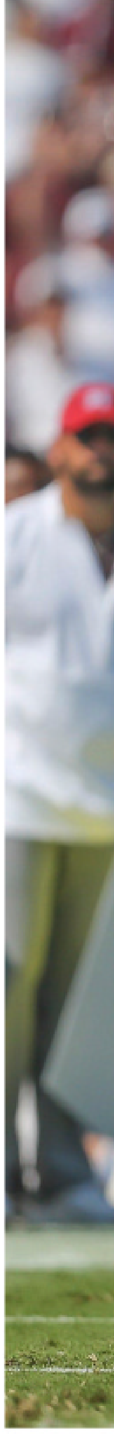
But that's not all. The coaching kings in the castles find their walls under siege from two other 2020 developments: the reinvigoration of the Black Lives Matter movement and name, image and likeness legislation. It's a triple whammy no corporate CEOs are dealing with.

When protests erupted in the aftermath of George Floyd's death, the outrage spread far beyond the scope of previous reactions to racist incidents and police brutality. It spread across demographics. It spread to suburbs and small towns. And among those feeling more empowered to speak out were college football players, a large percentage of whom are Black.

They spoke out about injustices and insults they have seen and experienced, including things that have happened within their programs and at the hands of their coaches. A bullying, benighted strength coach at Iowa? Swept out, despite decades on the job and a high-paying position as the right-hand man of the head coach. A defensive coordinator accused of overstepping his bounds in discussions with Black players at West Virginia? Gone, after decades of work at the FBS level as a coordinator or head coach. A successful head coach at Oklahoma State who couldn't figure out why his players might not respond well to his One America News T-shirt? Put in the corner by his star running back and investigated by his administration, with a corresponding reduction in pay and in the length of his contract.

Former players got the name of pro-slavery 19th-century politician John C. Calhoun removed from Clemson's honors college. Current players asked for changes at Texas that led to the field at Darrell K Royal–Texas Memorial Stadium being renamed in honor of Black Heisman Trophy winners Earl Campbell and Ricky Williams. A Mississippi State running back, Kylin Hill, accelerated the push to change the damn state flag of Mississippi.

For decades, football has had a faux-military ethos that it has celebrated and romanticized. There are some obvious correlations, and among them is the cherished



MISSISSIPPI STATE
8
WILLIAMS
7
12

KEITH WARREN/MISSISSIPPI CLARION LEDGER/USA TODAY SPORTS (HILL); BRIAN BAHR/GETTY IMAGES (HUBBARD)

ACTIVE DUTY
Hill (above) got the key to his hometown for his fight against the Confederate flag, while Hubbard called out his coach.

chain of command. In the military, commanding officers are not questioned by the rank and file without the specter of repercussion. In college football, coaches are not questioned by the players without specter of repercussion—except for now.

With breathtaking change-of-direction speed, hypercontrolling coaches have adopted a speak-your-truth support stance regarding their players' views on social issues. They stuck a finger in the wind, felt a gale force blowing against them and pivoted. Iowa's newly embattled Kirk Ferentz, the longest-tenured FBS head coach in the country, went from banning his players from having Twitter accounts, to allowing them one approved tweet, to letting go completely. Squelching speech—even if it's controversial or critical of the program—is now viewed as a dangerously outdated philosophy. (If you don't think it will hurt recruiting, turn the page.)

All this would come as a shock to the volatile martinet Frank Kush, if he were alive to see it. The old Arizona State coach, who felt empowered to physically abuse players by doing things like hitting them on the helmet with a metal construction bar, probably wouldn't be the type to welcome dissent from the squad.

It would also come as a shock to Mike Gundy, who is alive to see it. He's the OAN cowboy who was called out by his star running back, Chuba Hubbard, in a social media post that was quickly backed by many current and former Oklahoma State teammates. The days of the Coach As Unquestioned Emperor are ending on Gundy's watch—and it's not just because players are getting more vocal. They're about to get richer.

The NIL debate is also being heavily influenced by forces outside the coaches' control. It started in the courts, where the NCAA has gotten its intransigent tail kicked in various lawsuits. It continued into various state legislatures, who laughed at the NCAA's request to slow their roll when it came to creating laws that will pay the players. And now it is on to Congress, where NCAA president Mark Emmert lately is playing piñata for grandstanding senators—a role he is willing to endure as long as it leads to two things the NCAA desperately wants: an antitrust exemption and a federal law. (Trying to navigate 50 state laws of wide variance would be a logistical nightmare and create an uneven, patchwork playing field.)

CHA-CHING!
Slovis was the most accurate freshman QB in Pac-12 history; as a junior, that could translate to cash.

JORDON KELLY/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES

Eventually and inevitably, some of the millions of dollars that have been funneled into the coffers of athletic departments will be diverted into the pockets of players. Endorsement opportunities will become available to star athletes. Social media accounts will become profit centers. Clinics, lessons, appearances—many of the money-making avenues that used to be the sole domain of the coach—will now be shared with the players.

Most likely, that economic shift won't begin until 2021. USC quarterback Kedon Slovis, who will be a junior then, could be cashing in. So could LSU cornerback Derek Stingley. And North Carolina QB Sam Howell. Start wrapping your mind around the idea of, say, Howell's face appearing on a billboard touting Top of the Hill Restaurant & Brewery in Chapel Hill.

This would all come as a shock to Knute Rockne, if he were alive to—wait a minute, no it wouldn't. Some of Rockne's star players in 1919 snuck over from Notre Dame to Rockford, Ill., and played a pro game under assumed names for cash. (George Gipp played under the name "Baker.") According to one of the Notre Dame players, "I think Rockne may have found out, but he turned his head the other way."

It will come as a shock to Swinney—yes, him again—and he remains alive to see it. In 2019 he declared, "They may want to professionalize college athletics. Well, then, maybe I'll go to the pros. If I'm going to coach pro football, I might as well do that." He's got some young studs on his roster who are going to get paid via NIL; might as well accept it.

Of course, since this is college sports, all these seismic changes are accompanied by bureaucratic issues that could stretch on forever. The NIL compensation is overdue, but also problematic and complicated and cataclysmically timed. As one prominent athletic director put it earlier this summer, "Only in college athletics would we try to jam through a major rule change that will take money away from athletic departments during a global pandemic when everyone is losing millions."

Well, nobody ever said change was easy, especially in an enterprise as change-averse as college football. It will be costly, and unnerving for those who have benefited so greatly from the sport's rock-solid status quo.

But, virus implications aside, change also can be positive. The feudal lords can share some of the bounty and give up some of the authority without going bankrupt or becoming overrun by the serfs. Putting the athletes near the forefront—economically and ideologically—of what has become an increasingly coach-driven industry is probably not a bad thing.

It's hard for control freaks to let go. Thoughts and prayers are with the college football coaches who are going through so many challenges to their primacy, but don't worry. Those state trooper escorts aren't going anywhere. You're going to be O.K. □

ERICK W. RASCO

PAYING ATTENTION

WHAT BLACK RECRUITS LIKE TYLER BOOKER HEAR (OR DON'T HEAR) FROM COACHES ABOUT RACE WILL ALTER THE NCAA LANDSCAPE

BY CHANTEL JENNINGS

WHEN IMG ACADEMY football coach Bobby Acosta wanted advice for how to talk with his players about systemic racism and the Black Lives Matter movement after the killings of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor, the first call he made was to a 16-year-old.

Tyler Booker is the nation's top offensive lineman in his class—the "heartbeat" of the IMG team, says Acosta—and when the coach called, Booker told Acosta exactly where to start: *Talk about it. Be honest about what's happening. Don't ignore this, even if it's uncomfortable for some.*

Frank discussions about racism in America, Booker said, could impact college football as a whole. The perspectives and knowledge gained by IMG players (roughly 85% of whom are Black, Acosta says), at a school that has produced more five-star recruits in the last five years than all but four individual states, would eventually permeate NCAA rosters from coast to coast.

"I want to have these discussions to show people and educate them on the oppression of people of color in this country . . . and then learn how we can collectively make a change so my kids don't have to have that talk with their own football team," says Booker. "I don't want it to go away *for now* and have everyone forget about it; I want it to go away *forever*, so everyone can be seen as equals."

Acosta asked Booker (who, before even taking a snap in his junior season, has already received scholarship offers from Alabama, Miami, Oklahoma, Penn State and USC, among others) whether he thought any college coaches were taking a similar approach with their own teams, or with recruits like him.

Based on his experiences, Booker said it was mixed. Some of the coaches he spoke to were honest with him, acknowledging the protests against decades of systemic racism, while others seemed to avoid the topic. But Booker also said he was tracking the way coaches engaged and responded more publicly, on Twitter, in the form of personal statements. Since he's not able to visit prospective campuses because of the coronavirus, many of his early impressions of coaches and their programs have come from social media—namely, the way they responded to George Floyd's death. (SPORTS ILLUSTRATED examined the statements of all 57 Power 5 coaches who issued one in the week following the death of Floyd. The common word was *change*, while other top keywords were things like *team*, *country* and *coach*. The phrase *Black Lives Matter* appeared three times. *Police brutality*, *systemic racism* and *inequality* appeared only once each.)

"I noticed which coaches came out and said something [early on]. I made a mental note of that," Booker says. "I also made a mental note of the coaches who were late and seemed like their hand was forced to post something."

COURTESY OF IMG

"I NOTICED WHICH COACHES CAME OUT AND SAID SOMETHING," BOOKER SAID. "I ALSO MADE A MENTAL NOTE OF THE COACHES WHO WERE LATE AND SEEMED LIKE THEIR HAND WAS FORCED."

Acosta asked whether the timing of those responses had changed his recruitment at all, and Booker didn't say no.

He remembers saying: "I'm not just an athlete. I'm a person. I want to know that the [coach] I'm putting my trust in actually cares about me as a *person*."

Booker has had promising phone conversations with some coaches where he's felt comfortable talking openly about oppression, about his concerns as a young Black man in America, about the fact that on a run a few weeks ago a white woman yelled at him from her yard and Ahmaud Arbery's name flashed in his head.

But he's had a hard time focusing on those conversations—the ones that, though difficult, still felt good to have—because he's had other talks where the coach on the other end of the line remained silent about what's happening in this country, others in which he wasn't asked about his experiences or fears, others in which a world outside of a football field didn't seem to exist or matter.

"The conversations that stuck out to me the most," Booker says, "are the conversations I *didn't* have. Some coaches kind of avoided it and acted like it's not going on. They say they care about me—but if you really care about me, you should know that what is going on today affects me on a personal level."

Booker is not just thinking about what coach he wants to play for, but about the environment he'll be joining. "Wherever I end up, I want to make an impact on that community. I want my mark to be left on that campus," he says. "So, I'm taking note of which schools and which players, from which schools, are starting to make an impact."

What Booker has seen: In Mississippi, a June 22 tweet by Mississippi State running back Kylin Hill led directly to a vote last week in the state's House and Senate to finally remove the Confederate flag from the state banner. At USC, Black student-athletes formed the United Black Student-Athletes Association to "use its position of influence to improve circumstances for the Black community within USC and beyond." At Texas, student-athletes said they would withdraw from player recruitment and donor events unless several demands were met, including the

DEEP IMPACT
Booker, who has offers from Bama and other top schools, will look at a program's record of activism when making his choice.

athletic department donating 0.5% of its annual earnings to Black organizations and the Black Lives Matter movement. And at Texas A&M, quarterback Kellen Mond and receiver Jhamon Ausbon led a student-athlete push to remove a statue of Confederate general Sul Ross from the College Station campus.

Booker is not alone in watching, in knowing that he will someday use his platform for social justice work, in factoring this all into his recruitment. Says Tristan Leigh, a five-star senior tackle at Robinson Secondary School in Fairfax, Va., who's undecided about where he'll play next: "Student-athletes, we can use our voices so that people who *aren't* heard—people who don't have the same platform—get their views across, too. I would definitely be a part of something like that."

Ceyair Wright, a four-star senior cornerback from Loyola High, in L.A., is also undecided about where he'll play, but he's already using his platform, having created a video with his father that begins, "The Top 2021 and '22 Football Recruits in California Speak Against Police Brutality and Racism." Among the 18 high school players who lent their faces and voices: Korey Foreman, Rivals.com's No. 1 prospect in the '21 class, who is undecided, as well as others planning to play football at the likes of Notre Dame, LSU and Washington.

These young men know that, even before they set foot on campus, their voices matter. The top 15 recruits from that 2021 class average a combined 22,000 followers between Twitter and Instagram. And with continuing protests against systemic racism, along with a fall election that seems certain to further stoke racial tensions, it's almost a given that college athletes will speak out on matters of race and racism.

It's also a given that they'll be paying attention to the words and actions of the men recruiting them. Tyler Booker is going watch and see which coaches talk honestly and openly about what is happening in America, which coaches want to have a conversation even if it's uncomfortable. And he's going to see which coaches stay silent on those matters, knowing that silence speaks pretty loudly, too. □

SI ALL-AMERICAN

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COLLEGE FOOTBALL PREVIEW 2020

Scouting

BOLD, THAT TIGER: RUNNING BACK **TRAVIS ETIENNE** PASSED UP A CHANCE TO BE A HIGH DRAFT PICK TO PLAY ANOTHER SEASON AT CLEMSON. HIS RETURN MAKES HIS TEAM THE FAVORITE IN A PLAYOFF FIELD THAT, AS WE SEE IT, WILL HAVE A FAMILIAR LOOK

PHOTOGRAPH BY
DAVID E. KLUTHO

Reports

SI PREDICTIONS

SEMIFINAL
1 CLEMSON
4 GEORGIA

CLEMSON
VS.
ALABAMA

SEMIFINAL
ALABAMA 2
OHIO STATE 3

NATIONAL CHAMPION
CLEMSON TIGERS

CLEMSON

1

CROWNING GLORY

The last time we saw **Trevor Lawrence** in a game uniform, he was sinking into a locker room chair in the Mercedes-Benz Superdome after his worst performance as a Tiger. Previously unbeaten as a collegian, the sophomore quarterback had been dramatically outplayed by LSU's Joe Burrow in a 42–25 loss in the College Football Playoff championship game. "It sucks," Lawrence said after recording a career-low 101.8 passer rating. But that defeat will prove to be a one-time experience for a player many predict will be the No. 1 pick in the next NFL draft.

Lawrence is back, with plenty of elite company, including senior Travis Etienne, the leading rusher in school history, and senior receiver Amari Rodgers. The entire defensive line returns and it welcomes Rivals.com's No. 1 recruit, 6' 5", 290-pound tackle Bryan Bresee, centerpiece of the nation's top recruiting class. "We're going to have a really, really good football team," coach Dabo Swinney said after the LSU loss. Good enough to make a sixth straight CFP appearance, and to send Lawrence off as one of the college game's all-time greats. —*Pat Forde*

PLAYER TO WATCH

With Tee Higgins gone to the NFL and Justyn Ross out for the year after neck surgery, can Joseph Ngata become Lawrence's big-play target and the Tigers' next star wide receiver? Big (6' 3", 215 pounds) and fast, he drew raves at fall camp last year and showed flashes as a freshman.

2019 RANKINGS OFFENSE 4TH DEFENSE 3RD FINAL AP POLL 2ND

ALABAMA

2

POST-TUA DAYS

Plenty of teams would accept an 11–2 record, a Citrus Bowl bid and a second-place finish in the country's most difficult division, the SEC West. Not Alabama. Last year the Crimson Tide had arguably their worst season since 2013. And that means it's time for a rebound.

With the return of senior back **Najee Harris**, who scored 20 touchdowns last year, Nick Saban's biggest job will be filling the Hawaii-sized hole left by Tua Tagovailoa. But the coach has strong options. Mac Jones, a junior who had four starts last year and a 68.8% completion rate, will have to fend off freshman Bryce Young from Pasadena, Calif., who arrives as the top-ranked quarterback of the 2020 recruiting class. Alabama also needs to replenish the ranks at receiver after the departures of Jerry Jeudy and Henry Ruggs, both first-round NFL draft picks. But the Tide still have some of the best wideouts in the country, including senior Devonta Smith, who set a single-game school record last year with 274 yards against Ole Miss, and junior Jayden Waddle, who in 2019 led nation in punt returns (24.4 yards per) and caught six touchdown passes. —*Ross Dellenger*

FROM LEFT: NILS NILSEN; JOE ROBBINS/GETTY IMAGES

PLAYER TO WATCH

Defensively, the Tide have five returning starters, but they also get back a pair of linebackers who missed last year due to injury: senior Dylan Moses and grad student Joshua McMillon. Moses is the heartbeat of the Tide; as a sophomore in '18 he led the team with 86 tackles and was a finalist for the Butkus Award.

2019 RANKINGS OFFENSE 2ND DEFENSE 13TH FINAL AP POLL 8TH

OHIO STATE

3

FIELDS AND DAY HAVE AT IT

An end zone interception, a dropped pass and a couple of replay reviews that went the other way in a 29–23 semifinal loss to Clemson were all that kept the Buckeyes from a national title matchup against LSU last year. But their dominant season whetted appetites for more in the second full year under coach Ryan Day.

With 51 total touchdowns and 3,757 total yards, **Justin Fields** was a Heisman Trophy finalist in his first year in Columbus. The junior quarterback has an abundance of skill-position talent around him, headlined by wide receiver Chris Olave (12 TD catches in 2019) and transfer running back Trey Sermon (2,076 rushing yards at 6.1 per carry in three years at Oklahoma). The offensive line, rife with four- and five-star recruits, should again be powerful. The offense lost three top-20 NFL draft picks in DE Chase Young (No. 2) and CBs Jeff Okudah (3) and Damon Arnette (19), but brings back an all-senior linebacking corps of Pete Werner, Baron Browning and Tuf Borland. And don't forget punter Drue Chrisman, who in three years has allowed just 1.5 return yards per punt. —P.F.

FROM LEFT: G FIUME/MARYLAND TERRAPINS/
GETTY IMAGES; TODD KIRKLAND/GETTY IMAGES

PLAYER TO WATCH

At 6' 5" and 253 pounds, Zach Harrison is the latest luxury model rolling off the defensive end assembly line in Columbus. After forcing his way into the rotation he played 281 snaps, including 25 in a CFP start against Clemson. A five-star recruit, Harrison is the Buckeyes' leading returning sacker, with 3½.

2019 RANKINGS OFFENSE 3RD DEFENSE 4TH FINAL AP POLL 3RD

GEORGIA

4

RELOAD TESTING

With eight new starters on offense, why are the Bulldogs ranked this high? It's simple: dominant recruiting under Kirby Smart. All that talent is ready to fill the open positions on offense (sophomore WR **George Pickens** tantalized with his Sugar Bowl MVP performance) plus select spots on an experienced defense that allowed just 12.6 points per game last seasons, the fewest by a Georgia team in 39 years.

Where the Bulldogs must reinvent themselves is inside the helmet; they experience one spectacular meltdown every season. It came at Auburn in 2017, when an undefeated team unraveled in a 40–17 loss. In '18, LSU ended another unbeaten run with a 36–16 thumping. Last year Georgia was 5–0 and a 24-point favorite against a bad South Carolina team and lost 20–17 in Athens, spoiling a shot at the playoff. Those heartbreakers have prevented Smart from beginning to catch his mentor, Alabama coach Nick Saban, in championship rings. Speaking of which, the two are scheduled to meet in Tuscaloosa on Sept. 19, Smart's third attempt at beating Saban after two agonizing losses. —P.F.

PLAYER TO WATCH

Welcome to the latest edition of QB drama in Athens. After Jake Fromm vs. Jacob Eason (2017), Fromm vs. Justin Fields ('18) and Fromm vs. Fans Who Miss Fields ('19), now Georgia has two transfers competing: pro-style junior J.T. Daniels from USC and double-threat senior Jamie Newman from Wake Forest.

2019 RANKINGS OFFENSE 49TH DEFENSE 1ST FINAL AP POLL 4TH

PENN STATE

5

FRANKLIN'S FINEST?

Nobody in the Big Ten East has played Ohio State as tough as the Nittany Lions have the past four seasons. But Penn State hasn't beaten its nemesis since 2016, and the scarlet-and-gray roadblock atop the division isn't showing any signs of crumbling. Does James Franklin finally have a squad that can surmount that obstacle? Maybe. This could be Franklin's best team in his six years at State College. He has rising star power on offense (junior RB Journey Brown, sophomore RB Noah Cain, junior QB Sean Clifford and junior TE Pat Freiermuth) and playmakers on defense (senior DE Shaka Toney, junior LB **Micah Parsons** and seniors Tariq Castro-Fields and Lamont Wade in the secondary). They are complemented by an experienced offensive line and young talents moving into bigger roles at defensive end (watch for sophomore Jayson Oweh) and receiver.

The good news when it comes to taking down Ohio State? The Buckeyes will have to travel to Happy Valley, where the last three meetings have gone to the wire. The bad news? Due to pandemic rules, there won't be anything like the traditional, fever-pitch whiteout crowd for that game. —P.F.

PLAYER TO WATCH

Micah Parsons could be the best defensive player in the nation and the first one drafted in 2021. At 6' 3" and 244 pounds he blends startling speed and power with remarkable production. As a sophomore Parsons made 109 tackles, 14 of them for loss, and forced four fumbles. Missed tackles were a rarity.

2019 RANKINGS OFFENSE 15TH DEFENSE 8TH FINAL AP POLL 9TH

OKLAHOMA

6

HUGE SHOES TO FILL

It's becoming quite clear who Lincoln Riley's nemesis is: the SEC. A team from that conference has ended his first three seasons as Oklahoma's coach, each time in a CFP semifinal: Georgia (2017), Alabama ('18) and LSU ('19). The Sooners scored an average of 36.7 points in those losses—but surrendered an average of 54.0. Clearly, they are a good defense away from winning it all. The hiring of coordinator Alex Grinch last offseason resulted in a marked improvement—Oklahoma gave up 357.1 yards per game, down from 453.8—but as the year wore on, the defense wore down. With eight starters back, the unit can perhaps finally prove a worthy complement to the Sooners' high-powered offense.

Oklahoma's last three starters at quarterback—Baker Mayfield, Kyler Murray and Jalen Hurts—have earned two Heisman trophies and a second-place finish. Their successor is redshirt freshman **Spencer Rattler**, who already has Heisman hype despite having attempted just 11 college passes. But expect growing pains: OU lost three of its top four wideouts from last year, including first-round pick CeeDee Lamb. —R.D.

PLAYER TO WATCH

As Spencer Rattler goes, so go the Sooners. The 6-foot 200-pounder from Phoenix signed with Lincoln Riley as the consensus No. 1 QB recruit in the 2019 class. At Pinnacle High, he threw for an Arizona state record 11,083 yards, completing 70.6% of his passes, with 116 TDs and 33 interceptions.

2019 RANKINGS OFFENSE 6TH DEFENSE 64TH FINAL AP POLL 7TH

FROM LEFT: ANDREW DIEB/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES; DAVID STACY/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES

FLORIDA

7

ONE BIG HURDLE

Dan Mullen and the Gators can't get over the hump called Georgia. For three seasons the SEC East rival has stood in their way of the conference championship game, but for how much longer? Mullen became the first Florida coach to open his tenure with back-to-back double-digit-win seasons. It feels as if the Gators are *thisclose* to greatness—and achieving it will depend on a QB many believe is the SEC's best. Senior Kyle Trask is good enough to send incumbent Feleipe Franks packing to Arkansas. Trask threw for 300 yards in three of his last four games and finished with 25 TDs and seven INTs, but many of his top targets are gone, including Freddie Swain and Van Jefferson. Trask's sophomore backup, Emory Jones, is a powerful runner whom Mullen uses as he did Dak Prescott early in his career at Mississippi State.

Under coordinator Todd Grantham, Florida's defense has been one of the best in the nation the last two years, carrying a sometimes sluggish offense to ugly victories. But 2020 presents problems . . . such as the departure of much of the front seven. At least senior safety **Shawn Davis** is back to anchor the secondary. —R.D.

FROM LEFT: JOHN KORDUNER/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES; MICHAEL WADE/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES

PLAYER TO WATCH

Miami transfer Lorenzo Lingard, a 6-foot, 200-pound sophomore, might be one of the best running backs no one has heard of. A former No. 2–ranked recruit at the position, he suffered a left knee injury in October 2018 that derailed his tenure as a Hurricane. Florida has other RB options, but Lingard intrigues.

2019 RANKINGS OFFENSE 29TH DEFENSE 7TH FINAL AP POLL 6TH

NOTRE DAME

8

GOLD STREAK

The Fighting Irish won at least 10 games for the third straight season in 2019, for only the second time in school history. While that's partly an accounting trick (they played fewer games during the olden days), it's also a testament to what coach Brian Kelly has constructed in his decade at South Bend. Notre Dame might not be winning national titles, but the program is consistently relevant.

Continuing the current run could hinge on a new crop of skill-position talent. Among the returnees no running back had 50 carries last season, and no receiver caught a dozen passes. The Irish have intriguing freshman options (TE Michael Mayer, WR Jordan Johnson, RB Chris Tyree), but those players are coming in behind schedule. At least senior QB Ian Book will be operating behind a very good, very experienced line. Third-year coordinator Clark Lea is a coaching star in the making, having produced the school's two best scoring defenses since 2012. He's retooling a bit, but senior rover **Jeremiah Owusu-Koramoah** (80 tackles, $5\frac{1}{2}$ sacks, four passes broken up) is a high-impact centerpiece. —P.F.

PLAYER TO WATCH

Last November, Irish fans were down on Ian Book and panning Brian Kelly for a perceived pattern of QB regression. Then Book rallied Notre Dame to win its last six games, and the grumbling ceased. New OC Tommy Rees, promoted from QB coach, needs to get peak efficiency from the inconsistent senior.

2019 RANKINGS OFFENSE 13TH DEFENSE 12TH FINAL AP POLL 12TH

OREGON

9

D AS IN DUCKS

When you think of Oregon football, do you picture a wide-open offense blitzing downfield in flashy neon uniforms? If so, then think again. Mario Cristobal's Southern influence has taken hold in Eugene: The Ducks are big, strong and defensive-minded, and they'll need to tap into all three of those traits after the departure of QB Justin Herbert. Expect more handoffs to the best backfield in the Pac-12, led by 5' 9", 205-pound junior CJ Verdell, who gained 1,000 yards as both a freshman and a sophomore. He'll operate behind a line that sustained about as much loss as any position unit in FBS (three all-conference players gone) but retains junior Outland Trophy winner **Penei Sewell** at left tackle.

Remember that D we mentioned? The Ducks have eight starters back from a unit that allowed only one touchdown in a five-game span last season and could have three All-Americas: sophomore end Kayvon Thibodeux, junior DB Jevon Holland and senior DL Austin Faoliu. And with a conference-only schedule, Oregon is primed for not only a second straight Pac-12 championship, but possibly a playoff spot. —R.D.

PLAYER TO WATCH

Kayvon Thibodeaux is 6' 5", 250 pounds and can move, so it would be no surprise he led Oregon in sacks last year—except that he did so as true freshman. The defensive end is already one of the country's best pass rushers. His nine sacks were the most by a Pac-12 rookie since USC's Nick Perry in 2009.

2019 RANKINGS OFFENSE 16TH DEFENSE 9TH FINAL AP POLL 5TH

OKLAHOMA STATE

10

WILD COWBOYS

There has been more noise surrounding Oklahoma State than just about any program this offseason, and none of it has to do with the loaded returning roster. Maybe coach Mike Gundy made himself a national piñata—from callous comments about wanting the players back on campus in May to "run money through the state" to his infamous One America News Network T-shirt—to take pressure off his players? Nah.

Get past all that, though, and the actual football product should be excellent. Ten starters return on defense, almost all of them upperclassmen. Offensively, the Cowboys have the nation's leading rusher—and most public Gundy critic—in 6' 1", 207-pound junior **Chuba Hubbard** and an armada of receivers. Quarterback is the growth area, with Spencer Sanders likely to improve after a solid freshman season. He needs to cut down interceptions (11 in 247 attempts), but his passing numbers should jump with senior receiver Tylan Wallace back after missing the last five games of 2019 with a knee injury. Gundy's other problem, beyond self-sabotage, is Oklahoma: He's 2–13 against the Sooners. —P.F.

PLAYER TO WATCH

Chuba Hubbard has gained at least 100 yards in each of the 15 games in which he's had at least 18 carries. He rushed for 2,094 yards and 21 TDs last year, which should have earned more recognition. Challenging his coach politically in June raised his profile, which might actually help his Heisman hopes.

2019 RANKINGS OFFENSE 36TH DEFENSE 61ST FINAL AP POLL UNRANKED

FROM LEFT: BRIAN ROTHMULLER/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES; TROY WAYRYNEN/USA TODAY SPORTS

LSU

11

AFTER THE EXODUS

Ed Orgeron expected a wave of departures from his national championship team, but what happened in Baton Rouge was downright cruel. Nine underclassmen left early. Of the 22 starters, 14 are gone. The Tigers lost their leading passer, leading pass catcher, leading rusher, leading tackler and leading sacker. The man who overhauled the offense, passing game coordinator Joe Brady, is now with the Carolina Panthers, and the man who oversaw the defense for four years, Dave Aranda, is now coaching Baylor. Aranda's replacement is Bo Pelini, the former Nebraska coach, who is turning a 3–4 system into a 4–3. His assets include star cornerback **Derek Stingley**.

Schematically, the offense of coordinator Steve Ensminger is likely to remain similar to the one Heisman Trophy–winning QB Joe Burrow guided to a 15–0 record. Whether it's as dominant—well, that's a tall challenge. Redshirt junior Myles Brennan takes the reins after having thrown just 70 passes in his career. While five of Burrow's top eight targets from last season are gone, at least junior Ja'Marr Chase is back after piling up a nation-leading 1,780 yards last year. —R.D.

FROM LEFT: DERICK E. HINGLE/USA TODAY SPORTS; HANNAH FOSLIEN/GETTY IMAGES

PLAYER TO WATCH

A consensus All-America as a true freshman, 6' 1", 195-pound cornerback Derek Stingley is ready for his encore. All he did last year was lead the SEC in interceptions (six) and passes defended (21). The school describes Stingley on its website as "arguably the most impactful true freshman in LSU history."

2019 RANKINGS OFFENSE 1ST DEFENSE 33RD FINAL AP POLL 1ST

MINNESOTA

12

GOPHERS ON COURSE

Opinions about Minnesota's 11–2 record in 2019 diverge: Was it a flash in the pan aided by a soft schedule, or was it the start of something big? We're going with the latter. In his fourth season coach P.J. Fleck will establish the program as a regular Big Ten West contender. There is a lot of sizzle in Fleck, 39, but it's increasingly clear that there is substance underneath.

Minnesota lost its top rusher (Rodney Smith) and receiver (Tyler Johnson), but every other offensive starter returns. That includes the Big Ten leader in yards per catch (junior Rashod Bateman, 20.3) and underrated junior QB **Tanner Morgan**. The school's highest-scoring offense since 2005 could be even better this year, though losing coordinator Kirk Ciarrocca to Penn State is a blow. On defense, five of the top six tacklers must be replaced, including safety Antoine Winfield Jr. and corner Chris Williamson. But the rest of the secondary is back, and Fleck's recruiting has yielded capable players stepping into larger roles in the front seven. If the schedule holds, the West could be decided early. Minnesota plays Iowa and Wisconsin in its first three games. —P.F.

PLAYER TO WATCH

Out of Ryle High in Union, Ky., Tanner Morgan's only Big Ten offer came after P.J. Fleck moved from Western Michigan to Minnesota. But after decades of unspectacular QBs, the Gophers finally have a playmaker. In 2019 Morgan was fourth nationally in yards per attempt (10.2), and broke 11 school records.

2019 RANKINGS OFFENSE 22ND DEFENSE 37TH FINAL AP POLL 10TH

TEXAS A&M

13

TIME FOR THE PAYOFF

This is Year 3 for the Seventy-Five-Million-Dollar Man. So far the Aggies haven't exactly reaped the benefits of giving Jimbo Fisher a guaranteed 10-year contract at $7.5 million annually, because records of 9–4 and 8–5 aren't what the big-money boosters had in mind, but maybe now is the time. Fisher's machinations have been pointing toward 2020. The Aggies bring back almost every significant starter from '19, including a senior quarterback in **Kellen Mond** (2,897 yards passing and 500 rushing last year), a talented receiver in senior Jhamon Ausbon, a stable of solid running backs and a defense that could have as many as three All-SEC players in sophomore lineman DeMarvin Leal, senior middle linebacker Buddy Johnson and senior cornerback Elijah Blades.

The schedule, per the norm in the SEC West, is brutal, with trips to Auburn and Alabama and a home game against LSU, but Fisher has amassed enough talent to begin making some noise in the country's most difficult division. The biggest hole is up front on defense, where coordinator Mike Elko must replace lineman Justin Madubuike and his $11\frac{1}{2}$ tackles for loss. —R.D.

PLAYER TO WATCH

It's not often that a sophomore tight end is pivotal, but Jalen Wydermyer is an exception. At 6' 5" and 260 pounds, he is the latest supersize TE to be featured in Fisher's pro-style offense. As a true freshman Wydermyer started 11 games, gained 14.0 yards per catch and led Texas A&M with six receiving TDs.

2019 RANKINGS OFFENSE 62ND DEFENSE 39TH FINAL AP POLL UNRANKED

WISCONSIN

14

A STUDY IN STEADY

No team in the nation is as predictable as the Badgers. Every year under coach Paul Chryst, they find a terrific feature runner and a bludgeoning fullback. They put them to work behind a herd of mastodon linemen. They have functional quarterback play. They deploy a punishing defense. They contend for the Big Ten West. They do not win the conference title.

The obvious key to staying in contention is finding new playmakers on both sides of the ball. Jonathan Taylor (6,174 rushing yards in three seasons), Quintez Cephus (32.2% of the team's receiving yards and 38.9% of its TD catches last year), and linebackers Chris Orr and Zach Baun (a combined 24 sacks in 2019) are all gone. Can the next set of offensive skill players stretch the field? Can the next defensive disruptors take the ball away and create negative plays? One area of specific improvement should be attainable: ball security. Wisconsin lost 17 fumbles last season, by far the most in the Big Ten and the most in that league by any team in seven years. Taylor, for all his gifts, was fumble-prone, and junior QB **Jack Coan** coughed the ball up four times in 2019. —P.F.

PLAYER TO WATCH

The tailback is key—but which one? Sophomore Nakia Watson is the leading returning 2019 rusher (331 yards), but most of his production was early in the year. Senior Garrett Groshek is a skilled receiver out of the backfield. Paul Chryst isn't a tailback-by-committee guy, but he might have to become one.

2019 RANKINGS OFFENSE 23RD DEFENSE 10TH FINAL AP POLL 11TH

FROM LEFT: JOSHUA S. KELLY/USA TODAY SPORTS; STACY REVERE/GETTY IMAGES

15

CINCINNATI

THE ACE OF THE AAC

▸ The hallmark of Luke Fickell's three seasons at Cincinnati has been winning the close ones: The Bearcats are 10–3 in one-score games, piling up 22 victories in the past two seasons. Then, in February, the program won its biggest close one: Fickell snubbed Michigan State to keep building at Cincy. Also, well-regarded defensive coordinator Marcus Freeman turned down an NFL job.

▸ With what this team has in place—plus a regression in Central Florida and a coaching change in Memphis—the Bearcats are the team to beat in the American Athletic Conference. Junior QB **Desmond Ridder**, a two-year starter, guides the offense, and the defense is loaded. The biggest concern is replacing RB Michael Warren II, who rushed for 2,594 yards the past two seasons and iced some of those nail-biters with clock-killing runs. Senior Gerrid Doaks (1,039 career rushing yards as a backup) will now carry the load. The only AAC team to beat Cincinnati last year was Memphis, which did it twice, both times in Memphis. This year the Tigers must come to Nippert Stadium, where the Bearcats have a 13-game winning streak. —P.F.

FROM LEFT: KAREEM ELGAZZAR/CINCINNATI ENQUIRER/ USA TODAY SPORTS; JOE ROBBINS/GETTY IMAGES

PLAYER TO WATCH

Free safety James Wiggins was a hitter and a ballhawk in 2018, racking up 54 tackles and four interceptions. The 6-foot, 205-pound senior missed last season after tearing his left ACL days before the opener, but he returns to lead a secondary that will be the strongest unit on either side of the ball.

2019 RANKINGS OFFENSE 60TH DEFENSE 24TH FINAL AP POLL 21ST

16

USC

STAYING POWER

▸ Clay Helton's survival skills are unmatched. The coach is heading into a sixth year after many predicted his dismissal after Years 4 and 5, when the Trojans went a combined 13–12. On his side this year is experience. USC has 17 starters returning, led by one of the nation's best quarterbacks in 6' 2", 201-pound sophomore Kedon Slovis (71.9% completion rate, 3,502 yards). Helton also was able to hang on to up-and-coming offensive coordinator Graham Harrell, who runs an Air Raid system, which is a hot commodity in NFL and college circles. Helton did make a change to his defensive unit, hiring former Texas coordinator Todd Orlando, who has a plethora of talented players at his disposal, including defensive lineman **Jay Tufele**.

▸ The team's biggest question is the offensive line, which lost tackles Austin Jackson and Drew Richmond. But at least USC retains its top five rushers, including seniors Stephen Carr and Vavae Malepeai (a combined 24 career TDs). At receiver, the Trojans have electric junior Amon-Ra St. Brown (137 career catches) as well as senior Tyler Vaughns (2,395 career yards). —R.D.

PLAYER TO WATCH

Jay Tufele's 65 career tackles and 11 tackles for loss are just a taste of what he brings to the defense: The junior end has also returned a fumble for a TD and blocked a field goal. At 6' 3" and 315 pounds, the athletic Tufele has been the school's top lineman the last two seasons, and he earned All-Pac 12 last year.

2019 RANKINGS OFFENSE 37TH DEFENSE 78TH FINAL AP POLL UNRANKED

NORTH CAROLINA

17

HEELS UP

The hype surrounding Mack Brown's second Tar Heels team has gotten pretty thick, pretty fast. We're here to add to it. After years of subpar achievement under Larry Fedora, Brown quickly upgraded performance and recruiting, and now has a team capable of winning the ACC's perpetually up-for-grabs Coastal Division.

Sam Howell is a rising star at QB, having thrown for 3,641 yards and 38 touchdowns as a freshman. He has two returning 1,000-yard receivers in junior Dyami Brown and senior Dazz Newsome, and a 1,000-yard runner in senior Michael Carter. Last year nine of North Carolina's first 10 games were decided by seven points or fewer, and the high point was actually a loss, by a single point, to top-ranked Clemson, when Brown unsuccessfully went for two and the win late in the fourth quarter. The Heels won their final three games by a combined 152–30 against meh competition (Mercer, N.C. State and Temple), but that in itself was a statement. With 17 returning starters and a defense spearheaded by senior inside linebacker **Chazz Surratt**, expect more authoritative victories this year. —P.F.

PLAYER TO WATCH

Perhaps Mack Brown's greatest masterstroke since coming to Chapel Hill was moving Chazz Surratt from quarterback to linebacker—hardly your average position change. Last year the 6' 3", 230-pound Surratt paced the Tar Heels in tackles (115) and tackles for loss (15), and tied for the lead sacks (6½).

2019 RANKINGS OFFENSE 31ST DEFENSE 44TH FINAL AP POLL UNRANKED

MICHIGAN

18

MORE BLUE THAN GOLD

Bumbling and fumbling went the Wolverines in 2019. Stacked with experience and talent and deploying a brand-new offense, they blew a chance last season at a Big Ten title, thanks to costly turnovers against Wisconsin and Ohio State, and a dropped pass that could have delivered the winning touchdown at Penn State.

And now? Jim Harbaugh's sixth year at the helm could well be his most difficult. Gone are four All–Big Ten offensive linemen, QB Shea Patterson and the team's top three tacklers, though he still has junior LB **Cameron McGrone**. Throw in a schedule that includes road games at Ohio State, Michigan State and on-the-rise Minnesota, and 2020 could potentially set a new low for conference wins during Harbaugh's tenure. Speaking of which: His contract expires at the end of the 2021 season, and his salary ($7.504 million) trails that of only two coaches: title-game regulars Nick Saban and Dabo Swinney. Meanwhile, Harbaugh has lost his first five matchups with the archrival Buckeyes—the first coach in either school's history to do so—and has dropped four consecutive bowl games. —R.D.

PLAYER TO WATCH

While the Wolverines lose two All–Big Ten linebackers, they welcome back 6' 1", 205-pound junior Cameron McGrone. In his first significant time last year, the middle 'backer had 66 tackles (including 12 against Notre Dame), 9½ tackles for loss, four sacks, five quarterback hurries and one forced fumble.

2019 RANKINGS OFFENSE 44TH DEFENSE 25TH FINAL AP POLL 18TH

FROM LEFT: G FIUME/GETTY IMAGES; JOE ROBBINS/GETTY IMAGES

TEXAS

19

BACK FOR MORE

It has been 11 years since the Longhorns' last Big 12 title. *Eleven*. Quarterback **Sam Ehlinger**'s proclamation of "We're back!" during a postgame TV interview following a 2018 Sugar Bowl victory over Georgia was followed by an 8–5 season in which Texas struggled to defeat Kansas, lost at Iowa State and got beaten by 10 by TCU.

Ehlinger's decision to return to Austin for his senior year revived talk of a Longhorns championship, and there is reason for hope. Last year Texas struggled with injuries at running back and defensive back, but both groups head into 2020 healthy, with experience and talent. Fourth-year coach Tom Herman has said he expects five-star freshman RB Bijan Robinson to play this season. The defense will no doubt look different. Coordinator Todd Orlando was replaced by former Rutgers coach Chris Ash, who is converting the 3–4 scheme into a 4–3. Ash has a weak spot to address at linebacker while Herman now must figure out how to replace one of the best receiving duos in school history, Collin Johnson and Devin Duvernay (a combined 364 career catches for 5,094 yards). —R.D.

FROM LEFT: KEVIN JAIRAJ/USA TODAY SPORTS; MARK J. REBILAS/USA TODAY SPORTS

PLAYER TO WATCH

It all comes down to fourth-year starter Sam Ehlinger. With 3,663 yards, a 65.2% completion rate and 32 touchdown passes last year, he showed off a rocket right arm and more toughness than most at his position. Despite playing through a rib injury in 2019, he ran for 663 yards and seven touchdowns.

2019 RANKINGS OFFENSE 17TH DEFENSE 65TH FINAL AP POLL 25TH

ARIZONA STATE

20

THE SUN DEVILS ARE DUE

Herm Edwards has pulled some notable desert ambushes in his first two seasons, upsetting ranked Michigan State and Utah teams in 2018 and ruining heavy favorite Oregon's playoff bid last season. Next for the Sun Devils: to be just as tough on the road and to challenge for a Pac-12 South title—two steps they could take this season. If the schedule holds they will open in Los Angeles against what could be their prime divisional competition, USC. Arizona State will also travel to face North favorite Oregon. And don't overlook a game at Colorado, which is 2–0 against Edwards.

With an inexperienced offense built around sophomore QB **Jayden Daniels**, defense will be the calling card. Edwards and co-coordinators Marvin Lewis and Antonio Pierce bring ample NFL experience and brainpower to a unit that returns eight starters, including its top four tacklers. Last year ASU allowed its fewest points per game in a decade (22.4), and held five opponents to 14 or fewer. The Devils' defense also led the Pac-12 in takeaways (28) and was third nationally in fumble recoveries, with 15. —P.F.

PLAYER TO WATCH

Quarterback Jayden Daniels dazzled as a freshman, with 3,298 total yards and just four turnovers in 463 passes and runs. He vaulted for the winning TD against Washington State and threw for 408 yards in the takedown of Oregon. Now he will have to carry an offense that is breaking in a lot of new players.

2019 RANKINGS OFFENSE 96TH DEFENSE 35TH FINAL AP POLL UNRANKED

STAR SHOWDOWN

Lamar Jackson is on the cover of this preview, with good reason. But don't forget the other half of the QB tug-of-war that will define the NFL's next era. ***PATRICK MAHOMES*** also has generational talent, plus a Super Bowl ring and now the largest contract in league history. NFL 2020: It's Lamar vs. Patrick, who ya got . . . ?

JAMIE SCHWABEROW

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